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This dissertation seeks to remedy the gap in the scholarship pertaining to the intersection of justice and aesthetics in 1790s British literature. While many critics have considered the literature of this period within the historical context of the French Revolution and its tumultuous aftermath, few have questioned how contemporary writers use specific aesthetic categories to argue for egalitarian social change. My inquiry, however, is not limited to a discussion of the overlap between aesthetics and justice in early British Romantic-era literature. In addition to examining how Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and William Blake radically rewrite sensibility and the sublime to articulate the possibility of justice, I also argue that these writers radically rethink subjectivity and demonstrate a parallel between formal aesthetic features and phenomenological identity structures. Thus, this dissertation is an overture into the possibility of justice vis-à-vis aesthetic expression of, as Wollstonecraft conflates the term, "sublime sensibility" about human suffering under inequitable laws and social customs. This aesthetic expression condemns the economic, physical, and emotional dislocation individuals endure, but it also harbors significant implications for how we understand the individual. Conflating the traditionally segregated categories of sensibility and the sublime, these writers also challenge the notion of a unitary self and articulate instead the existence of the subject as multiple, the "I" as "we," the "I" as, in Emmanuel Levinas's term, "being-for-the-other" or, in my phrasing, "communal subjectivity." Just as community in the form of egalitarian justice is essential to the

aesthetic constructions of sensibility and the sublime of Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake, so too is community at the heart of subjectivity as announced by these writers. Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake deconstruct the traditional paradigms and uses of sensibility and the sublime, liberating them from aesthetic categories and resituating them onto sites of human egalitarian struggle. These writers articulate a possibility of justice beyond the written laws and social customs that aim to enforce compliance. The possibility of justice, for these writers, must be found beyond the call or command of the law, beyond, as Derrida describes it, the “force of law”; the possibility of justice, for these writers, is aesthetic(s).

“LAWLESS WINGD & UNCONFIND”: AESTHETICS AND THE POSSIBILITY
OF JUSTICE IN EARLY BRITISH ROMANTIC-ERA LITERATURE

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

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dedicated with “lawless wingd & unconfind” gratitude and love
to my green lights at the end of the dock,

NORMAN L. CHERNIK

MICHAEL R. DELAFIELD

ADELINE FORTUNE DELAFIELD

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: AESTHETICS AND
THE POSSIBILITY OF JUSTICE

The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. . . . Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”

The most sublime act is to set another before you.

— William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Overture(s)

This dissertation is an overture into the possibility of justice beyond the law.¹ It is *a proposal made with the aim of opening negotiations* into the possibility of justice vis-à-vis aesthetic expression of “sublime sensibility” about human suffering under inequitable laws and social customs.² This aesthetic expression condemns the economic, physical, and emotional dislocation individuals endure, but it also harbors significant implications

¹ I take this phrase, “the possibility of justice,” from the symposium (and the subsequent published volume) entitled *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. The symposium was held during the fall of 1989 at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law.

² Italicized words in the Overture(s) section are quoted from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3d ed., Dec. 2004, online version March 2011, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/135281>, accessed 19 April 2011. The term “sublime sensibility” is used by Mary Wollstonecraft in *Maria*.

for how we understand the individual. “Sublime sensibility” is a radical revision of the “individual” subject itself wherein the “I” is “we,” wherein the “I” is, in Emmanuel Levinas’s term, “being-for-the-other,” or, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s phrasing, “being singular plural,” or, in my expression, “communal subjectivity.” This dissertation is *a declaration* about the way four early Romantic-era writers, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and William Blake, deconstruct the traditional paradigms and uses of sensibility and the sublime to liberate them from aestheticized categories and resituate them as aesthetic practices and onto sites of human egalitarian struggle and communal subjectivity.

Throughout this dissertation, I will write of the aesthetics of justice and of the justice of aesthetics. I will write of “justice” and of “aesthetics,” however, not as a finished given, but as a Derridean gift, as a ceaseless aporia and atemporal overture that is *the opening up or revelation of a matter* between individual subjects that calls into question the very existence of those “individual” subjects. This aporia reveals a nonjuridical sense of the rights and obligations between non-subjects. And so, finally, this is my overture, my point of *beginning or commencement* that seeks to fill the overture—the *hole*—left in the way most scholars have written of justice and of aesthetics: that the possibility of justice must be found beyond the call or command of the law that “is always an authorized force, a force that justifies itself or is justified in applying itself, even if this justification may be judged from elsewhere to be unjust or unjustifiable” (Derrida, “Force of Law” 5). My overture is that the possibility of justice is aesthetic(s).

There are specific, “real world” implications for considering the intersections of legal rights and aesthetic categories. For example, discussing the work of Helen Maria Williams, I assert that it is through sensibility and the sublime that Williams—and, she hopes, her readers—comes to denounce primogeniture. In this and other “real-world” examples, the instrument of injustice (primogeniture) is historically fixed. However, the state of egalitarianism between individuals for which the writers in my dissertation argue also contains an atemporal, phenomenological element that is always already in process: justice arises from the way an individual comes to understand her own individuality only vis-à-vis her relation to another, and only vis-à-vis welcoming the other without assimilation. The art of opening a space for egalitarianism without duplication or equivalency is justice and “the declaration of peace itself” (Derrida, *Adieu* 47); assimilation is war, as “[w]ith the same, one is never at peace” (Derrida, *Adieu* 85). “Justice,” then, in this dissertation, is both burdened and liberated by its indebtedness to history, phenomenology, and, ultimately, aesthetics.

Rethinking aesthetics and social justice

The argument as well as the methodology at the center of this dissertation posits that aesthetics is not a discrete, segregated entity from social justice but rather a porous, related *intervention* that both clarifies and challenges our understanding of social justice. Further, the implications that aesthetics has for understanding social justice pertain not just to an isolated, excised moment of a literary or historical past, but to our present-day attempts to locate the possibility of justice. In a recent *PMLA* special topic issue,

“Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” Jean-Jacques Lecercle asserts that “the task for twenty-first-century literary criticism is a return to the political” (916).³ Lecercle qualifies this assertion, however, by noting that he is “proposing not a return to the old Marxist concept of literature as a *reflection* of the historical, political, and linguistic conjunctures but an active concept of literature as an *intervention* in them” (919, emphasis mine).⁴ Indeed, just as the writers I discuss in this dissertation were, I argue, intervening into what is frequently understood as the “public” sphere of social justice via the oft-conceived “private” realm of aesthetics, I regard my methodology as offering a way to write and speak about the possibility of justice not just as it *existed* during a literary time period, but as it *exists* today.

The idea that aesthetics enacts—and demands—progressive intervention into the social is reminiscent of Derek Attridge’s statement that “[w]e experience literary works less as objects than as events” (2). This dissertation approaches the selected early Romantic-era texts not as closed documents but as dynamic events that function as sites of the human struggle for social justice and identity formation. Although this dissertation

³ In “Critical Paradigms,” Jonathan Culler’s introduction to the *PMLA* special issue, he notes that the unifying motif throughout the collected abstracts for and published articles in the issue is that of return. In one of the cornerstone texts of late twentieth-century criticism, Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton argues that the idea of the aesthetic returns with such persistence because it is implicated in questions such as freedom and legality and autonomy (3).

⁴ While I find illuminating Lecercle’s notion of literature as intervention, I dispute in part his claim that “[g]one are the days of committed criticism, gone also the days of formalist criticism (structuralism is behind us)” (919).

examines aesthetics as “sites of struggle,” my methodology is not primarily Marxist, just as my approach is not solely one deriving from deconstruction even though the dissertation questions the limitations and even legitimacy of logocentric, institutionally voiced justice. Certainly, Althusser’s theory of interpellation and subjectivity is an important element of my discussion of justice and narrative process in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, yet so too is Derrida’s notion of hospitality central to my reading of nonjuridical justice in the same novel. Indeed, this dissertation is guided by a network of critical drives: Marxist notions of ideological and material production, deconstruction’s urge to reveal the inherent multiplicity of linguistic and other stated universalist structures, new criticism’s exacting attention to formal aesthetic features, new historicism’s contextualism, and Levinasian and Derridean articulations of subjectivity as responsibility for the other. My critical approach is also deeply indebted to the work of Saree Makdisi, whose scholarly work on subjects ranging from Blake to Palestine take up the question of text- and individual-as-network. Ultimately, my hope is that this dissertation’s critical mode reflects the content of its argument: that aesthetics, justice, and subjectivity are all structural but not inflexible, ideological as well as material, and representational as well as epistemological and ontological.

This dissertation offers a new way to understand the intersection of aesthetics and justice as it considers how sensibility and the sublime in texts by Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake intervene into the essential questions pertaining to the possibility of nonjuridical human(e) justice. Further, this dissertation draws important parallels between the reconstituted categories of sensibility and the sublime and an

identity theory that privileges the multiple over the singular as it analyzes how each writer transforms these conventional aesthetic categories to articulate a more egalitarian, humanist, and emancipated vision of agency that is communal subjectivity. In “Said, Palestine, and the Humanism of Liberation,” Makdisi emphasizes the critical discourse that acknowledges that social justice is inexorable from aesthetic concerns. Describing Edward Said’s notion of the collective individual denoted by the term “being-in-common,” Makdisi argues that for Said, “humanism involved developing a logic of being-in-common, in which the task of interpretation was never confined to books, music, and art but also applied to life and to humanity itself” (452). Similarly, writing of Blake’s texts, Makdisi notes that “art for Blake is not an isolated, abstract, and idealized activity, but rather an ensemble of material practices, makings, beings, thoughts, images, and imaginations that constitute and define life itself. . . . Art for Blake is, in other words, a creative and an *ontological* activity, rather than simply a representational or epistemological one” (262-63).

Rewriting *sensibility* and *the sublime*

This dissertation argues that Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and William Blake rewrite the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime in a way that rethinks the possibility of justice. As I detail below, the term *sensibility* has come to mean many things in literary and cultural studies, from a large-scale inquiry pertaining to “the quality of literary experience and its relation to moral and social behavior that concerned eighteenth-century writers and readers” (Keith, “Poetry,

Sentiment, and Sensibility” 127) to a specific physiological reference to a person’s heightened sensory perception. In my discussion of how some early British Romantic-era authors rewrite sensibility, I use the term to mean the literary expression of an individual’s receptivity to and profound concern for the unjust suffering of others. I mean to signify sensibility as an aesthetic category in that I am looking at texts that invoke the stylistic tropes and signposts of the literature of sensibility. However, sensibility in this dissertation is also always tied to justice, as a character is described as possessing fine sensibility only when that character is moved to remedy the inhuman(e) suffering caused by the written laws or entrenched social customs that cause social inequality.

Of course there are variations on how Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake employ the aesthetic category of sensibility, with Godwin and Blake being the most radical in their rewriting of the aesthetic category. For example, for Godwin, it is not only a character who lacks sensibility when he or she does not recognize juridical inequity, but, as I will demonstrate in my discussion of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin describes the law itself as being monstrously inhuman(e) because of its *insensibility*. While Godwin extends the rhetoric of sensibility onto the law, Blake enacts the most extreme rewriting of sensibility. Blake adopts many of the traditional components of sensibility dealing with empathetic and compassionate receptivity (and personifies them as Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love) while transforming sensibility into what he calls *Vision*. As I argue below, Blake’s notion of Vision is a further rewriting of the aesthetic category of sensibility.

The term *the sublime* is also burdened by various meanings in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature and its scholarship. Most frequently, the term is used synonymously with the rationally based Burkean or Kantian articulations, both of which incorporate elements of Longinian psychological transport. In my argument that Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake reject these notions of the sublime, I use *the sublime* to mean a realization about the necessity for universal equality and egalitarian justice and the communal nature of the individual subject. Just as Blake most radically transforms *sensibility* into *Vision*, he also most radically rewrites *the sublime* into what I call *the exemptive sublime*. Within my discussion of Blake, *exemptive* means freedom from interpretive mandates and heterodox meaning; the *exemptive sublime* means the reader's realization that she possesses this freedom and can construct her own system of understanding. The exemptive sublime, however, is an experience only for the reader who sees with Blakean Vision.

Among the writers in my study, *the sublime* (including the Blakean *exemptive sublime*) cannot be severed from *sensibility* (including Blakean *Vision*), as the sublime is an experience that can only be attained if one possesses sensibility to the unjust suffering of others. The terms *the sublime* and *sensibility*, then, are also unseverable from *justice*, by which in this dissertation I mean a state of egalitarianism between individuals. *Individuals*, of course, is complicated by my argument that the term *individual* may accurately refer to a specific biological person, but that subjectivity (and, thus, an *individual subject*) is always already a communal, relational process.

This rewriting, and the subsequent rethinking in this dissertation, involves analyzing all three elements—sensibility, the sublime, and justice—not as discrete and segregated but as communal and relational; indeed, these elements may more properly be thought of as modes, networks, or processes. The operational mode of justice is always relational and set within the context of human exchange⁵; justice is always a process defined by navigating the network of legal rights, moral duties, and ethical imperatives that exist between an individual and his or her community; so too, I posit, are sensibility and the sublime of Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake. Locating a discourse of human—and humane—egalitarian exchange in the articulations of sensibility and the sublime of these writers, I demonstrate how they emphasize exchange not only in the literary content and thematic strings that tie these writers together, but in the formal aspects of their literature: “sensibility” and “the sublime” become dependent on each other in rhetorical expression (markers of sensibility are extended into the discourse of the sublime and vice versa). The aesthetics of sensibility and the sublime, as constructed by the writers whom I discuss in this dissertation, emphasize community, equality, and actualization via a realization about the access to justice. Specifically, people who do not have access to sensibility are characterized by these writers as inhuman and inhumanely unable to engage in relational, communal, human exchange. Those who possess

⁵ Because I am writing of social justice between individual subjects, and how sensibility and the sublime counters the very idea of “individual” subjects, I will confine my discussion to exchange between humans. The confines of my discussion for purposes of this dissertation, however, is not meant to suggest that there were not other discourses of the necessity for egalitarian exchange between, for example, humans and animals.

sensibility, on the other hand, have access to sublime moments about the necessity for juridical egalitarianism (articulated as *some* equality pursuant to the written law) and a model of subjectivity that recognizes the communal nature of individual subjects.

A dissertation that aspires to understand justice in aesthetic terms, and, namely, in the terms “sensibility” and “the sublime,” counters one major strain of the critical scholarship surrounding late eighteenth-century and early Romantic-era writing. Perhaps because of the resoundingly uniform citation to Janet Todd’s *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986), much of the critical discourse surrounding the “literature of sensibility,” as it is frequently named, has not found great scholarly value in either the body of literature or the aesthetic category by which it is classified. Todd describes “the mark of sentimental literature” as “[t]he arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices,” and suggests that this uninspired literature “buttonholes the reader and demands an emotional, even physical response” (2).⁶ Perhaps more damaging to sensibility’s scholarly reception is Todd’s blunt conclusion

⁶ Stressing what she regards as the pedantic and pedagogical paradigms of “sentimental literature,” Todd describes sensibility’s prescriptive design as “exemplary of emotion, teaching its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one presented in its episodes,” and as literature that “moralizes more than it analyzes” (4). Suzanne Keen similarly views sentimental literature as “exploit[ing] its consumers’ appetites for feeling, taking on a pedagogical role and training its readers in emotional responses through exemplary responses of its characters” (46).

that sentimental texts “require no deconstructing . . . and they discourage multiple readings” (3).⁷

My reading of sensibility understands this aesthetic category in less restrictive ways and builds upon the scholarship that has identified its public implications and even radical elements. For example, although G. J. Barker-Benfield continues to promulgate a reading of sensibility that emphasizes the “receptivity of the senses,” in *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1992) Barker-Benfield shifts sensibility from defining a specific literary genre detailing the escapades of emotionally overwrought, individual characters to a mode of experiencing the world that defined an entire culture. Barker-Benfield explains sensibility as denoting

the receptivity of the senses and referr[ing] to the psychoperpetual scheme explained and systematized by Newton and Locke. It connoted the operation of the nervous system, the material basis for consciousness. During the eighteenth century, this psychoperpetual scheme became a paradigm, meaning not only consciousness in general but a particular kind of consciousness, one that could be further sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body. (xviii)

Despite this more holistic view of sensibility, Barker-Benfield’s discussion stays primarily grounded in analyzing the implications of sensibility in relation to then-changing gender associations and the contemporary rise of a consumerist middle class. Some scholars have attempted to broaden an understanding of sensibility as a

⁷ Todd does, however, assign some critical agency to the literature of sensibility in the way in which it marries aesthetics and ethics to reveal an “aesthetic quality of virtue” and an alliance of literature and moral philosophy (3).

progressive, humanistic, and communitarian aesthetics, which is a reading more in line with the critical position announced in Chris Jones's *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (1993). In this and other texts,⁸ Jones argues that writers used sensibility to suggest a radical reimagining of the social bonds and the importance of egalitarian "fellow-feeling." More recently, critics have noted that "a nerve-based sensitivity and susceptibility is only one side of the story" (Bray 81), and that the literature of sensibility "shows reason and feeling in constant negotiation and interaction within consciousness, with neither triumphing over the other" (Bray 92).⁹ Scholars have also considered the more philosophical and phenomenological aspects of what was once thought of as a trifling aesthetic category and have placed sensibility in broader, multidisciplinary discourses.¹⁰ However, this dissertation seeks to fill a hole in the critical discourse surrounding this topic by arguing that sensibility has not only political

⁸ See Chris Jones, "Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility." See also Chris Jones, "Travelling Hopefully: Helen Maria Williams and the Feminine Discourse of Sensibility."

⁹ In *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*, Jerome McGann similarly states that sensibility "brought a revolution to poetic style exactly by arguing—by 'showing and telling'—that the traditional view of mind and reason would no longer serve a truly reasonable . . . mind" (5).

¹⁰ Evan Gottlieb has discussed how discourses of sympathy were essential to modern British identity formation, and Vivasvan Soni has argued that sentimentalism "is an ethics of tragedy, in the precise sense that it is an ethics that emerges from a phenomenology of tragic theatergoing" (296).

implications, but phenomenological and juridical ones as well, by arguing that the rhetoric of sensibility is rooted in egalitarian justice and communal subjectivity.

Certainly, there is a tradition of considering the close alignment of sensibility and moral theory that dates back to the initial articulations of “moral sentiments.” In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith, following a discourse set in motion by the third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Scottish Enlightenment theorists Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, directly linked the capacity to feel sympathy with another person with the quality of being a virtuous person. At the deepest roots of humanity, Smith argues, is the act of engaging in benevolent human exchange.

[T]he sweetness of [one’s] sympathy more than compensates the bitterness of that sorrow, which, in order to excite this sympathy, they had thus enlivened and renewed. The cruelest insult, on the contrary, which can be offered to the unfortunate, is to appear to make light of their calamities. To seem not to be affected with the joy of our companions is but want of politeness; but not to wear a serious countenance when they tell us their afflictions, is real and gross inhumanity. (19)

Smith’s theory is grounded in the idea that the duties and obligations of human conduct—that just and moral actions—are situated in sympathetic human exchange not only or even primarily in legal mandates or juridical codes. Smith writes that

[w]ere it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. (129)

Smith's moral philosophy begins with a human subjective emergence that occupies the shared space of the aesthetic (beauty and deformity) and the social. According to Smith, an individual is always a multiple, communal subject and can never make nonrelational moral judgments. As Saba Bahar explains it, for Smith "there can be no 'I' without an other who shapes, modifies and consolidates personal identity" (97). It is only through imagining how we are perceived by others (or, more specifically, how an individual is perceived by Smith's "impartial spectator") that we can understand the harmony of benevolent or the discord of unjust moral actions. Noting the intersection of aesthetics and community underlying Smith's I-other, spectator-object formula for identity formation, Bahar argues that Smith places subjectivity into the sphere of "social theater" that is "interactive and dialogic" (97). Similarly, Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla have recognized that for Smith, the aesthetic cannot be understood as a separate realm from interpersonal, human conduct (4).¹¹

Smith himself emphasizes the component of human "equitable justice" in aesthetic considerations.¹² In a passage reminiscent of the aesthetic discourse Edmund

¹¹ Noting the corporeal quality of aesthetics, Terry Eagleton opens the first chapter of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* with the seemingly counterintuitive sentence: "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body" (13). Eagleton continues by explaining that "[i]n its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought" (13).

¹² Dieter Paul Polloczek writes that sympathy functioned as a "nonlegal rhetorical institution[] of equitable justice" (vii).

Burke presented in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, published two years before the publication of *Moral Sentiments*, Smith discusses the difference between the road that leads to the acquisition of wealth, greatness, and moral corruption, and the road that leads to the attainment of wisdom, virtue, and moral fortitude. These two different “pictures” appeal to two different kinds of people: those who are characterized by “proud ambition and ostentatious avidity,” and those who embody “humble modesty and equitable justice” (73). Smith describes the pictures in this way:

[T]he one more gaudy and glittering in its colouring; the other more correct and more exquisitely beautiful in its outline: the one forcing itself upon the notice of every wandering eye; the other, attracting the attention of scarce any body but the most studious and careful observer. They are the wise and the virtuous chiefly, a select, though, I am afraid, but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The mob of mankind are the admirers and the worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness. (73)

For Smith, the picture that attracts those who are motivated to serve their own individual interests of pride and greed is intense, imposing, and associated with the vastness of a mob; the picture that stirs those who are motivated by an emphasis on communal well-being is subdued, harmonious, and associated with a limited but virtuous group. The former picture harkens back to Burke’s description of a sublime object, which in part is rugged, negligent, and enormous; the latter picture is reminiscent of Burke’s beautiful object, which is small, smooth, and polished.

Although Smith explicates his moral theory with language that recalls Burke’s descriptions of the beautiful and the sublime in *Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, Smith is no Burkean. The prevailing distinction between their theories is the benevolent,

interpersonal communitarianism that permeates Smith's text and the self-interested, isolated segregation that defines Burke's. Burke's aesthetic theory of the sublime is founded on rigid laws of demarcation about what specifically qualifies as "the sublime" versus "the beautiful." Ashfield and De Bolla characterize Burke's methodology as one that "seeks to fragment and fracture our experiences of the sublime in order to create as full a taxonomy as possible" (5).¹³ In sharp contrast to Smith's theory of how sensibility can move individual actors to remedy communal inequity, Burke's theory of the sublime privileges self-preservation above all else. Burke explains that "[t]he passions which concern self-preservation, turn mostly on *pain* and *danger*," and that these "are the most powerful of all the passions" (36; emphasis in original). Furthering the divide between Smith and Burke is Burke's emphasis on distance and isolation from the events that evoke a sublime experience: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (36-7). Reminiscent of the later Kantian ideal of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment, Burke's sublime requires a detachment from the human exchange that is essential for Smith. Frances Ferguson comments that both Burke and Kant "link the beautiful with society and the sublime with individuals isolated either by the simple fact of their solitude or by an heroic distinction that sets them apart even as they participate in social enterprises" (3).

¹³ The inadequacy of establishing a "taxonomy" of the sublime mirrors Susan Manning's statement that attempts to define sensibility by specific, delineated characteristics is a "fiction of taxonomy" (82).

Given Burke's monolithic presence in eighteenth-century British discourse of theories of the sublime, it is not surprising that twentieth-century scholars have applied a fundamentally Burkean paradigm to their readings of late-eighteenth century and early-Romantic articulations of the sublime.¹⁴ Yet this paradigm wrongly "assume[s] the existence of a generic British 'romantic' discourse on the sublime that is both uncomplicatedly idealising and largely apolitical" (Duffy 2). In other words, this paradigm strips any communal, human component out of the sublime. As this dissertation argues, such a paradigm ignores the aesthetics of the sublime (and sensibility) articulated by contemporary writers who were breaking down the constitutive, formal laws of this aesthetic category to argue for egalitarian social justice. These writers did not just use an aesthetic category to describe acts of justice; rather, they deconstructed form and rebuilt it in a way that privileged the multiple community over the separate individual and nonjuridical equity over legally-sanctioned laws.

Chapters overview

Chapters are organized by author, and the order is roughly chronological based on the publication date of the main text discussed in the chapter. However, all of the main

¹⁴ Indeed, the two most frequently cited texts on the Romantic-era sublime do not account for the radical and decidedly anti-Burkean articulations and uses of the sublime by contemporary writers. In *The Romantic Sublime* and in *Solitude and the Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel and Frances Ferguson both enact primarily Kantian-Burkean readings of the sublime. For a discussion of the limitations of this and similar approaches, see Duffy's introduction to *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*.

texts I address were published in the 1790s, the tumultuous decade following the fall of the Bastille and the beginning of the French Revolution. While the egalitarian ethos flowing across the English Channel from France was initially received with widespread approval, by 1790 the so-called “revolution controversy” was already underway. Within months of Edmund Burke’s chastising the Revolution in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft published a rebuke in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), while Thomas Paine continued the castigation of Burke in *Rights of Man* (1791). The debate about parliamentary reform, inheritance rights, and the role of a monarchy was certainly not limited to printed books and pamphlets. Societies (such as the prominent London Corresponding Society) called for a reconsideration of who should be afforded legal rights as well as for a renunciation of entrenched social customs that enforced separation among class and gender lines. Indeed, these calls became so threatening to the ruling class that in 1795 Parliament enacted the Treason Act and the Seditious Meetings Act. These laws provided the government with a legal means of silencing prominent “Jacobins,” such as the radical leaders John Thelwall, John Horne Tooke, and Thomas Hardy, all of whom were arrested and tried under the laws although eventually acquitted. The government clampdown was so caustic that booksellers refused to publish the preface to Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) in its first editions for fear of being prosecuted.

As the main texts I discuss were all published within the 1790s, the chapters are primarily arranged according to how the authors rewrite and radicalize sensibility and the sublime to argue for egalitarian justice and articulate notions of communal subjectivity;

namely, the chapters are organized based on how radically sensibility and the sublime are resituated from aesthetic categories to aesthetic expressions of the possibility of justice where that justice is a humanism not based on social class, written laws, or hereditary customs, but on “inclusivity and community” (Makdisi, “Said, Palestine, and the Humanism of Liberation” 443).¹⁵ For example, I begin my discussion with Williams’s *Letters Written in France* because it is the text that adheres most closely to the traditionally conceived rhetoric and linguistic markers of sensibility and the sublime. In other words, it is easier to recognize in Williams when the author is working with the formal conventions of sensibility and the sublime than when Blake is doing so. Indeed, Blake so radically rewrites these aesthetic categories, and the formal conventions are so difficult to detect, that the terms of these categories must be similarly rewritten. Thus, in my discussion of Blake’s rewriting of *sensibility* and *the sublime* I will speak of Blakean *Vision* and the Blakean *exemptive sublime*.

In chapter 2, I argue that in Helen Maria Williams’s epistolary *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790*, not only does Williams infuse sensibility with an unwavering egalitarian ethos, but she also redefines the traditional separation between the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime so that her aesthetics themselves rupture categorical division. This rupturing, in which aesthetics is not a taxonomic bounding but rather a mode of expressive and equitable restructuring, characterizes her

¹⁵ Writing about Edward Said’s discussion of the idea of Palestine, as opposed to the geographical place of Palestine, Makdisi characterizes Said’s argument as one about “a sense of justice and a concept of humanism not predicated on claims of ethnic, racial, or religious exclusivity but, rather, on inclusivity and community” (443).

radical humanism as much as it characterizes her radical aesthetics, for Williams's texts announce a subjectivity founded on the notion of the subject as a communal structure. In this structure, Williams defines the individual subject as a communal space possessing what I term "communal subjectivity." This phenomenological structure understands the individual to be a transpersonal, open, intersubjective community who is individuated through her relationship to and responsibility for others.

Williams is an important starting place for my overall argument about the implications aesthetics have for the possibility of justice. Because *Letters Written in France* are nonfictional, first-person accounts of historical events, Williams can offer her readers specific examples of how the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime can spur human egalitarian justice. Written in France one year after the fall of the Bastille, Williams uses the rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime to laud the French citizens who support the Revolution and work to enfranchise a wider segment of the population. Explicitly aligning sensibility with the ability to experience a sublime realization that universal human rights must be recognized for all people, Williams suggests that a person's insensibility causes that person to perpetuate social injustice. However, Williams also pointedly depicts these "real-world" implications in her *poem* "An American Tale" (1786). In my reading of this poem, I demonstrate how communal subjectivity—the notion that subject and identity formation is always relational and rooted in human exchange—is closely aligned with Adam Smith's theory of moral judgment and its reliance on the presence of the other; further, I show how Williams's communal subjectivity and Smith's theory of moral judgment resonate with Emmanuel

Levinas's theory of subjectivity as ethical relation. In this chapter, I will add a new strain of criticism to the scholarly discourse surrounding aesthetics to argue that through her reconfiguring of sensibility and the sublime, Williams articulates an egalitarian identity theory that presages post-structuralist and modernist thinking about the fluidity of personal identity and the narrative that there exists a unitary "self." Contrasting sharply with Burke's notion of the sublime, which privileges power, segregation, distance, and limitation, Williams's sublime is characterized by democratizing difference. Just as Williams's use of sensibility embodies a proto-Levinasian notion of individuation via sociability, her use of the sublime in her long poem "An American Tale" bears remarkable parallels to Derrida's notion of individuation via hospitality and a rectification of the sin of separation, an aesthetics that parallels communal subjectivity.

My reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's work in chapter 3 picks up this thread of communal subjectivity. I argue that although Wollstonecraft's articulation of this process is not based on justice as ethical hospitality (as is the case, I posit, with Williams), her epistolary novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (published posthumously in 1798) also announces an understanding of egalitarian justice that is derived from the "sublime sensibility" of communal identification. Indeed, despite the chorus of scholars who characterize Wollstonecraft as condemning sensibility and advocating reason alone as the most effective writing style, I demonstrate that *Maria* initiates an argument furthered by Godwin: that sensibility is an essential component of an individual's ability to access a sublime realization about when one should disavow the written law and engage in a kind of civil disobedience. Similar to the way in which Williams roots sensibility and the

sublime in communal, egalitarian ideals of liberty, Mary Wollstonecraft liberates sensibility and the sublime from aesthetic categories that privilege isolation and places them within the public discourse of social change. In chapter 3, I focus primarily on Wollstonecraft's oft-neglected novel. I argue that in this novel, sensibility and the sublime are not discrete aesthetic categories but rather modes of human exchange that provide access to one's liberating "own sense of justice." This justice, which one comes to know through "sublime sensibility," as Wollstonecraft conflates the terms in the novel, is governed by communal natural rights mandates and not strict adherence to positive, written law.

Just as Williams's texts advocate a "real world" application of the message of egalitarian justice they espouse, *Maria* not only alters sensibility and the sublime into sites of political and personal transformation, but it also provides a practical model of how people, especially women, can accomplish this transformation. In the most radical textual enactment of the interplay between aesthetics, justice, and personal agency in *Maria*, the protagonist argues in the court-room scene at the end of the novel that the all-male jury should be moved by their hearts and heads to form a community of resistance to protest unjust, gender-biased laws by engaging in jury nullification. Maria asserts that if her male counterparts fail to uphold the natural law, she will recover her own remedy not in a court of law but by engaging in a kind of proto civil disobedience and renouncing what Wollstonecraft describes in the Preface as "the partial laws and customs of society" (59).

William Godwin's epistolary novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) more radically suggests that *no* law is just because the very nature of judicially enforced codes is inherently suspect. In chapter 4, I establish how Godwin uses the rhetoric of sensibility to describe the monstrous—or *insensible*—nature of the law and of those who have been corrupted by it. Significantly, it is in sublime moments of recognition about the monstrosity of the law that characters are depicted as being the most human and the most humane. Whereas Williams and Wollstonecraft demonstrate an egalitarian ethos underlying sensibility and the sublime and raise implications that ethos has for communal notions of both justice and identity formation, Godwin more directly and radically conflates the rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime with that frequently associated with articulations of justice. In the process, Godwin suggests that justice is ultimately a *narrative*—and not a *political*—act that is grounded in “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.” Godwin's novel concludes that textual construction, justice, and identity formation are ideologies and material practices that are inextricable from each other. I will examine this conclusion vis-à-vis Althusser's theory of identity formation, which posits that the very act of identifying as an “I” is inseparable from ideological narrative *prescription*, *conscriptio*n, and *inscription*. In *Caleb Williams*, the narrator is unambiguous that justice *and* injustice are achieved through narrative acts, and that these narrative acts are the means by which individuals write themselves into—and out of—existence.

Emphasizing the humanistic foundation of his aesthetic and juridical theories, in *Caleb Williams* Godwin demonstrates that the “sublime of true virtue” and the “pathos of

true sympathy” are rooted in the human—and specifically *humane*—exchange at the heart of the then-nascent theory of ethical hospitality. No one in *Caleb Williams* is more human(e) than Mr Raymond, the person who lives outside of the law with a “gang” who embody communitarian ideals of equality and liberation. Harkening back to Williams’s notion of hospitality as justice, Godwin more rigorously investigates ethical hospitality. Surprisingly, Mr Raymond has received almost no scholarly attention; however, in my reading Mr Raymond is essential to the novel’s articulation of justice because he personifies a communal space of equality that is achieved through “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.” I also explain how Godwin’s text is reminiscent of Mary Wollstonecraft’s early articulations of jury nullification, as Godwin both explicitly reveals the inequity in the application of written laws and more implicitly uses the rhetoric of sensibility to argue that making rational decisions about justice starts with one’s heart and an acknowledgement about the fellow-feeling of communal ties that construct an individual.

More than any other writer I discuss in this dissertation, William Blake formally enacts how aesthetic structures parallel subjective ones and offer an opening to approach the possibility of justice. In chapter 5, I show how Blake transforms the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime even more radically than the three writers who precede him in this dissertation so that *sensibility* becomes *Vision* and *the sublime* becomes what I call *the exemptive sublime*. In this chapter, I focus primarily on Blake’s *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794). Although this long visual and verbal design has not generated as much scholarship as many of Blake’s other texts, it is essential to this

dissertation's inquiry because it considers how an "individual" becomes physically constructed and psychologically constrained by multiple external and internal factors, such as written laws, familial and social customs, and most significantly, I argue, contemporary Enlightenment epistemological paradigms. Indeed, in *Urizen* Blake rewrites more than the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime; he rewrites the creation story of Genesis and, in doing so, redefines who should be held accountable under moral law for the Fall (at different moments in the poem we might answer Urizen, Los, or the Eternals), what the dictates of that law are, and who has authority to inscribe and prescribe what is normative.

By reimagining logocentric origins, *Urizen* emphasizes (re)creation in its thematic content and formal structure as well as in how a reader can (re)create meaning in the world outside of the verbal and visual design. In chapter 5, I examine how Blake's text rebukes Enlightenment theories—and attendant metaphors and linguistic associations—about knowledge and life, two elements that are at the center of the biblical and Urizenic creation stories; namely, Blake rewrites sensibility into Vision and recreates what it means to see (i.e., to have "light," to be "enlightened," to be out of the "dark") and what it means to be ontologically viable (i.e., be out of the creative and generative "void"). For Blake, Vision is multiple and is contrasted against Enlightenment "single," bounded, empirical vision; the Enlightenment eye is "vegetative," biological, and mortal. Blake co-opts some of the signposts of the literature of sensibility—such as enthusiasm, pity, and mercy—into his articulation of Vision, and he is explicit in his belief that those who look at the world with a vegetative eye have no Vision and thus no empathy.

Commonly referred to as “composite art” because of Blake’s use of both verbal and visual designs, Blake’s texts emphasize the resonances between aesthetic structures and experiences of the sublime.¹⁶ Rather than producing a sense of frustration on the part of the reader that feels limiting, arresting, or dysfunctional, the texts offer a new way of reading just as they offer a new way of seeing, and this way of reading and seeing is what I designate as *the exemptive sublime*. In this space, meaning is neither tyrannically mandated nor teleologically structured; meaning originates with the reader and not with the Logos. The exemptive sublime is a productive space of liberty that is outside of orthodox interpretation or even assumption and, thus, outside of juridical commands. As the originator of meaning, as an agent of Vision, the reader must create “a new way of making the world” that is born from “a new way of sharing, of loving, of living, of being *in common*” (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 263). Just as the sublime articulated by Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin can only be reached via sensibility, the Blakean exemptive sublime is open only to a reader with empathetic Vision. Similarly, the “sublime sensibility” of the first three writers always implicates issues of social justice, and, as a state of (re)creative multiplicity, the Blakean exemptive sublime is tied to justice because it is a space of emancipation from the injustice of orthodoxy and hegemony.

In the conclusion, I accept Blake’s challenge (as I hope I will have been doing throughout the dissertation) to write about a new way of making meaning about the

¹⁶ The term used by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*.

intersection of aesthetics and justice, a new way of seeing an “old” (and, specifically, critically mined) text, by offering a reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In the conclusion, I more rigorously investigate how Levinas’s theory of justice as being-for-the-other and Derrida’s theory of hospitality deeply implicate the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime and the notion of communal subjectivity, but also how these twentieth-century articulations of nonjuridical responsibility have direct implications not just for Romantic-era literature, but for how we might proceed as we write about aesthetics and the very real possibility of justice.

CHAPTER II

“A LINE OF CONNECTION ACROSS THE DIVIDED WORLD”:

JUSTICE, AESTHETICS, AND COMMUNITY IN

HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS’S *LETTERS* AND POEMS

[I]t may possibly be within the compass of human ability to form a system of politics, which, like a modern ship of discovery . . . sailing sublimely over the untracked ocean, unites those together whom nature seemed for ever to have separated, and throws a line of connection across the divided world.

— Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France*

The one is responsible for the sin of the other. I am in principle responsible, prior to the justice that makes distributions, before the measurements of justice. . . . The other engages you in a situation where you are obligated without culpability, but your obligation is not less for all that. It is at the same time a charge. It is heavy and, if you will, goodness is just that.

— Emmanuel Levinas, “Proximity”

A line of connection

The literature of sensibility offers a complex space of inquiry about the intersection of egalitarian ethics, literary aesthetics, and juridical concerns. Because sensibility is rooted in acting with benevolence toward others and cultivating “fellow-feeling,” there are inextricable communal and subjective elements underlying the aesthetic category of sensibility. Despite the relevance of sensibility to questions about what literature can say and *do* about the possibility of justice between humans, the

literature of sensibility has undergone a complicated critical reception.¹ As Susan Manning has remarked, sensibility has not yet triumphed over its “embarrassing association” (80) with an aesthetics of uncontrolled and uncontrollable emotional response and stock characters such as the “man of feeling” and the female figure embodying virtue in distress. In *Radical Sensibility*, Chris Jones explains that the trouncing of sensibility even at its literary inception was propelled in part by anti-Jacobin sentiment, which considered untethered emotion as a precursor to radicalized forms of social fracture and disavowal of the status quo. Jones remarks that “[t]he common anti-Jacobin narrative paradigm aligns sensibility with selfishness, sees the cultivation of an enthusiastic aesthetic taste as self-indulgent, and deep sympathetic emotions as dangerous” (16). Jones explains that anti-Jacobin satirists did such a good job of derailing the aesthetics of sensibility by “ridiculing and suppressing the threat of radical sensibility” that, to this day, readers and critics alike “have difficulty in responding seriously to the language of sensibility” (17).

Adding to the scholarly conversation that finds critical significance in the aesthetic category of sensibility, scholars have criticized as “a fiction of taxonomy” the restrictive lens through which literary history has attempted to define and categorize sensibility, noting that rather than expressing a specific period of time (mid- to late-eighteenth century), a philosophical approach (anti-rationalist), or a mere celebration of

¹ For a summary of the critical treatment the literature of sensibility has received, see Carey, especially 5-9. For scholarship that provides an overview and identifies common traits of the aesthetic category “sensibility,” see Pinch, “Sensibility”; see also Manning.

somatic empiricism, sensibility is “a system of relations and ruptures” (Manning 82). Manning herself, though, places this “system of relations and ruptures” within the larger purview of “a fluctuating but continuous repertoire in emotional representation” (82). The emphasis on *emotional* representation is clearly supported in the literature of sensibility; however, as I will demonstrate in this and other chapters of this dissertation, I extend the critical lens of sensibility to argue that sensibility is also an aesthetics of juridical and phenomenological representation. Similarly, there is a critical narrative that considers the affective, melodramatic elements as part of a larger, didactic rhetorical writing strategy and situates the aesthetics of sensibility within various contexts and inquiries. For example, G. J. Barker-Benfield analyzes the gender implications of sensibility in relation to the rise of the female middle-class readership, and how this readership provided a public space for previously private, domestic matters.² Barker-Benfield even locates nascent stages of feminism in the “culture of sensibility,” explaining that the public reading forum allowed female writers to publicize issues of gender inequality and spurred group awareness on the part of women regarding their “victimization” by men (xviii). However, discussing the transformation of gender roles and expectations that occurred at the site of sensibility, Barker-Benfield reads Helen Maria Williams as contributing negative stereotypes of the hyper-emotive female who idolizes the goddess of sensibility, a practice of emulation that “welcomes dependence and self-effacement” (265). In *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution*,

² For further treatment of the gender and domestic/private versus political/public aspect of sensibility, see Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

Deborah Kennedy supports the contention that Williams sometimes writes in a “self-deprecatory” manner, but argues that “[a] self-deprecatory stance was a common strategy for women writers, and would probably have seemed especially necessary for one who published on a political topic, since there was a longstanding tradition of excluding women from political discussion” (63). As I discuss later in this chapter, I read Williams’s writing as announcing not conservative gender stereotypes, but rather radical, humanistic subjective constructions.

Other scholars have placed sensibility within a framework that links aesthetics and ethics, namely, within the Scottish Enlightenment school of moral philosophy³ that treats what is beautiful as what is good, virtuous, and true. Significantly, this linking of aesthetics and ethics had a decidedly social dimension, as sensibility “came to denote the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering” (Todd 7). In “Natural Jurisprudence and the Theory of Justice,” Knud Haakonssen identifies a practical, behavioral aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment’s moral theory. Haakonssen explains that one’s perceptive power “stimulated the response of the sentiments and thus directed action” (208). Similarly, Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla have explained that one cannot understand eighteenth-century British aesthetics as a category separate from conduct (4).

³ The eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment is embodied primarily by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. For a helpful summary of the main ideas and contributions of each of these philosophers to the practice of aestheticizing morality, see Todd 25-28.

The view that sensibility allowed a person access not just to his or her empathy for the troubled position of others, but to a desire to remedy such injustice, is the activist strain of sensibility of what Chris Jones has termed “radical sensibility.”⁴ Radical sensibility is contrasted to the sensibility of the trifling “man of feeling” depicted in such texts as Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*. Writers of radical sensibility, such as Helen Maria Williams, deconstruct the traditional bonds of communal affiliation—such as bonds based on family and social rank—in favor of a “universal benevolence seeking the widest communal good” (Jones, “Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility” 4).

While the critical conversation about the activist branch of sensibility has done much to lift the aesthetic category out of its “embarrassing” place in literary history, the scholarship has not gone far enough. This chapter addresses the gap in the scholarship and examines the connections in Williams’s texts between egalitarianism, aesthetics, and subjectivity. My analysis of the “aesthetics” arm of this connection is not limited to Williams’s use of sensibility alone. Building upon what critics have argued about Williams’s “radical sensibility,” this dissertation investigates how egalitarianism also operates vis-à-vis the aesthetic category of the sublime. I significantly extend the critical narrative about Williams’s aesthetics by arguing that her rewriting of sensibility and the sublime evinces an equally revolutionary notion of the way in which aesthetic categories and form itself can articulate a notion of identity formation that is rooted in egalitarianism

⁴ For a thorough discussion of “radical sensibility” see Jones, “Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility,” “Travelling Hopefully: Helen Maria Williams and the Feminine Discourse of Sensibility,” and *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s*.

and community. This chapter asserts the novel argument that Williams characterizes the subject as a communal space individuated through a relationship to and responsibility for others in a way that presages post-structuralist and modernist thinking about the fluidity of personal identity and the narrative that there exists a unitary “self.”

In this chapter, I demonstrate how in *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790* and in select poems, not only does Williams infuse sensibility with an unwavering egalitarian ethos, but she also redefines the traditional separation between the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime so that her aesthetics themselves perform a rupturing of categorical division. This rupturing, in which aesthetics is not a taxonomic bounding but rather a mode of expressive and equitable restructuring, characterizes her radical humanism as much as it characterizes her radical aesthetics, for Williams’s texts announce a subjectivity founded on the notion of the subject as a communal structure. I argue that the radical nature of Williams’s use of aesthetic categories stems not just from its egalitarian urges, but from the ways sensibility and the sublime become gateways for expressing the communal ontological and phenomenological structures of the individual, of the “I” as “we.”

I have analyzed primarily *Letters* because of the way it most acutely articulates how Williams revolutionizes the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime, as well as how it announces a radical way of conceiving of identity formation.⁵ The

⁵ The scholarship on Helen Maria Williams is far from prodigious, and while she published a number of nonfiction texts (primarily letters and essays) as well as collections of poetry between the years 1782 and 1827, the only critical edition of her

epistolarity of *Letters* is an interesting analogue to the egalitarian thematics of the text: just as Williams revises sensibility and the sublime to argue for a communal ethos and even subject formation, the text merges the traditionally separate realms of “private” letters and “public” novels. Further, the way Williams uses aesthetic categories in *Letters* also complicates this traditional dichotomy, as she asserts that people of fine sensibility have access to the “private” matters of their heart which enables them to enact “public” egalitarian change. However, the egalitarian practice of democratizing difference by emphasizing the communal nature of identity formation is not only a central element in *Letters*. In the poem “An American Tale” (1786), Williams demonstrates an even earlier articulation of what she will advocate for in *Letters*: that identity formation is based in what I term *communal subjectivity*—the understanding of an individual as a transpersonal, open, intersubjective community. Emphasizing the importance of an individual’s moral responsibility to act justly toward others even in the face of significant difference, communal subjectivity can be more fully understood by reading it alongside Emmanuel Levinas’s articulation of subjectivity as responsibility for the other and Derrida’s notion of individuation via hospitality and a rectification of the sin of separation. In the case of “An American Tale,” enacting justice takes the form of transcending the difference between American and Royalist soldiers.

work is *Letters Written in France* (edited by Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser). Perhaps not surprisingly, *Letters* is one of the texts that is addressed more frequently in the limited Williams scholarship; other texts discussed are her poems “To Sensibility” (1786) and *Peru, a Poem* (1784), and her nonfiction *A Farewell, for Two Years, to England* (1791).

Democratizing difference

“An American Tale” relates the story of an English father, his daughter Amelia, and her American lover Edward. Underscoring the potential danger of difference to propagate war and division even among family members, Williams’s poem valorizes Edward for acknowledging the communal nature of individuals and enacting peace in the face of difference. In “‘Storms of Sorrow’: The Poetry of Helen Maria Williams,” Deborah Kennedy characterizes Williams as a “pacifist poet” who lent her voice to the anti-war poetry that was sparked by the American Revolution and, more specifically, by the haunting quality of this war which pitted British soldiers against their own relatives who had emigrated (80). Kennedy notes that Williams’s anti-war poetry “fails to recreate the historical scenes, but her aim was to depict and speak to a reality of the human heart that would transcend historical conditions” (79-80). Indeed, poems like “An American Tale” emphasize “that all share a common humanity. If one can be merciful to the enemy, even love and marry the enemy, then maybe peace can be restored” (82). While the poem certainly demonstrates a “common humanity,” the human exchange and the expressions of sensibility and the sublime at the center of the text go further than recognizing commonality in the face of difference: the poem demonstrates how Williams revolutionizes aesthetic categories to express a mode of identity formation based on the subject *as* community. In other words, her text demonstrates an early articulation of what would come to be associated with Levinasian and Derridean ethical subjectivity, or what I call Williams’s “communal subjectivity.”

In “An American Tale,” Williams blends the voices of an unrelated, third-party speaker with that of the first-person voices of Amelia, her unnamed, Royalist father, and her American lover, Edward. The poem begins with the daughter placing herself in mortal danger to comfort her dying father, who was wounded in battle fighting for the British against the American forces, including Edward. As her father’s wounds are too severe for him to live much longer, Amelia wishes to find peace in death alongside him:

In vain thy wretched child is come,
 She comes too late to save!
 And only now can share thy doom,
 And share thy peaceful grave! (6.1-4; 56)

As Amelia consoles her father, he explains that a “Stranger,” an American soldier, had come to his aid despite their conflicting allegiances. Praising the “ennobled mind” of the young soldier, Amelia’s father states:

Born in the western world, his hand
 Maintains its hostile cause,
 And fierce against Britannia’s band
 His erring sword he draws;

 Yet feels the captive Briton’s woe;
 For his ennobled mind,
 Forgets the name of Britain’s foe,
 In love of human kind. (9.1-10.4; 56)

Although they were fighting for different countries, because of the young soldier’s enlightened awareness of and respect for his fellow-creatures, that is, his sensibility, he did not kill Amelia’s wounded father but rather helped to ease his pain and suffering.

The soldier's activist compassion causes Amelia to draw comparisons between the "enemy" soldier and her lover, Edward, whom she believes died in battle. Using rhetoric often associated with sensibility, Amelia notes that the soldier and Edward are similarly "ennobled" through their mercy and "kind pity." Amelia praises the way in which the soldier risked his own life "[t]o comfort, and to bless" the enemy (her father) who is now under his benevolent care. She praises her lover's "virtues that were thine." Revealing himself to be her lover, Edward exclaims that his own father has relented in his insistence that he not unite with Amelia in the face of Edward's "constant pain" during their separation. He pledges that despite her father's bellicose stance, Edward and Amelia will console her father's grief until he passes away:

And soon thy honor'd sire shall cease
 The captive's lot to bear,
 And we, my love, will soothe to peace
 His griefs, with filial care. (30.1-4; 60)

Edward exclaims that despite their profoundly conflicting ideologies, allegiances, backgrounds, and personal histories, the two families will unite as one in compassion and benevolence. Collective identity will be built upon the smoldering embers of violent separation. Those once held "captive" will be liberated under "filial care."

While the traditional rhetoric of sensibility is at the fore of the poem, so too is the radical implication of Williams's ethics. Diction involving the physical manifestations of sensibility ("tears," "pangs," "pain," "panting"), the psycho-emotional manifestations of sensibility ("ennobled mind," "grief," "sorrows"), and the communal dimensions of sensibility ("kind pity," "Friendship," "wounds to heal," "love of human kind," "mercy")

predominate. Yet the events of the poem enact the ultimate, materialized hope of Williams's sensibility: that warring factions will come together via an acknowledgment of their shared humanity. Kennedy finds this hope to be "Williams posit[ing], rather tenuously, an idealistic humanitarianism which will triumph over any worldly strife" ("Storms of Sorrow" 82); however, I find Kennedy's reading too restrictive because it is grounded in an understanding of the individual as a unitary—and ultimately self-interested—entity, which is the very theory of subjectivity that, I argue, Williams counters in her poem. Williams's hope is grounded in a radical understanding of communal subjectivity. More than articulating a message about the importance of mercy for all people regardless of geographical or class situation—an articulation that was revolutionary in its own right—Williams's sensibility posits that identity formation itself is grounded in an acceptance of the responsibility for the well-being of the other. In addition to reimagining the relationship between the aesthetics of sensibility and the ethics of justice and equality, Williams's texts reimagine the phenomenological and ontological structure of an individual *as* community.

Emmanuel Levinas posits that subjectivity is built upon the edict that an individual has not merely a passive responsibility to do no violence to the other, but an active responsibility to welcome the other. Derrida speaks of this Levinasian ethical responsibility as a kind of hospitality marked by an "ethico-metaphysical moment" (92) of welcoming the other, a moment that is "the declaration of peace itself" (Adieu 47). The phenomenologically based ethical philosophies of Levinas and Derrida emphasize non-violent, albeit radical, alterity based on collective identity, just as Williams's radical

sensibility is premised upon notions of fundamental, human equality. Alterity is deeply connected to equality because alterity finds the difference of the other to be sacred, not violent, and requires that one welcome the other while preserving this sacred difference. Indeed, what makes Edward's acts in "An American Tale" so deeply illustrative of a notion of identity formation that is rooted in community is that he welcomes that which is not just different, but he also places his own existence at risk to take responsibility for keeping alive and honoring that which is deeply different. In contrast, those who lack sensibility (such as the Baron du Fossé) are engaged in the violence of stratification and separation.

The interrelation between sensibility and Levinasian and, later, Derridean subjectivity may be underscored by considering the violence inherent in Hegelian consciousness. This consciousness calls for a process of "nullifying the object as distinct [from it], *appropriating* it as its own, and proclaiming itself as this certainty of being all reality, of being both itself and its object" (144). The intrinsic violence in Hegel's articulation of the self-other relationship is adamantly rejected by Levinas, who argues that otherness is not to be overcome and strong-armed into submission, but rather welcomed *without* being assimilated, without being extinguished. Hegel's being-for-itself is contrasted against Levinas' being-for-the-other, which seeks individuation through sociability rather than totalization. In "The Proximity of the Other," Levinas describes sociability as the "alterity of the face, of the *for-the-other* which calls me to account; it is the voice that rises in me before any verbal expression, within the mortality of the I, from the depths of my weakness. This voice is an order to respond for the life of

the other man. I do not have the right to leave him alone at his death” (215). This principle of grave responsibility is literally enacted by Edward (and is found in the benevolent sympathy expressed by Mons. du Fossé).

One of the charges that could be leveled against Williams’s sensibility is that it seeks to homogenize individual differences; however, this charge falters once we understand the common ties whereby sensibility privileges instead of assimilates difference. In “An American Tale,” Edward, the American revolutionary, and Amelia’s father, the British Royalist, embody vastly different subject positions; however, their regard for the peace of what is common—though not the same—trumps the violence of fracture and segregation. Indeed, it is in the space of radical alterity itself that communal bonds are formed, for “an encounter between the same is merely kinship, whereas hospitality arises out of an encounter between strangers” (Levinas 211). In “An American Tale,” Edward is referred to as a “stranger” twice by Amelia. This designation of difference underscores how Williams’s texts celebrate the efforts by those occupying vastly dissimilar subject positions to forge a “filial” bond under the guidance of sensibility and in an “ethico-metaphysical moment” of communal subjectivity. “An American Tale” examines how communal subjectivity suggests the possibility of justice as justice is enacted within the confines of a poem. However, four years after the poem’s publication Williams imports the notion of communal subjectivity into her nonfiction *Letters Written in France*. In this text, Williams transforms aesthetic categories into mandates for social action when she employs the rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime to

laud the “real-world” egalitarian practices of French revolutionaries, practices which she describes as being rooted in sensibility and the sublime.

Fine sensibility enacts justice

Helen Maria Williams begins *Letters Written in France* with an anecdote that epitomizes how sensibility can offer a “real-world” possibility of justice. She recounts a story in which she was interrupted in her writing by a visitor who conveys a “little incident” that so disturbs the author’s composure that she must immediately further the narrative and give it to her readers unadulterated and “warm from my heart.” Williams explains how in the midst of deliberations about a more equitable system of hereditary property distribution among brothers, the National Assembly was itself interrupted by the eldest son of a man who was near death and who wished to be able to grant to his father the satisfaction of knowing that all of his male children would be provided for. Although it would mean a great financial loss to himself, the son had come to implore the Assembly to pass the equitable decree for just property distribution under consideration. Williams writes of the son’s act: “If you are not affected by this circumstance, you have read it with very different feelings from those which I have written it: but if, on the contrary, you have fallen in love with this young Frenchman, do not imagine that your passion is singular, for I am violently in love with him myself” (89).

The “feelings” with which the author has written about the incident are the disturbances felt by the heart of sensibility, a “psychoperceptual scheme” in which one’s consciousness is “sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the

outside environment and from inside the body” (Barker-Benfield xvii). In the incident described above, Williams rejoices at the selfless act by a brother who forgoes individual, personal interest for the sake of pluralistic, communal equality and happiness. Although in this example it is the author herself who is deeply moved, throughout *Letters* Williams writes about people like the son who, because of their fine sensibility, are prompted to enact justice in the name of the communal good, even if their actions cause personal financial, physical, or emotional loss. Egalitarianism is central to Williams’s “radical sensibility,” according to Chris Jones, who argues that it is a mistake to conflate the radical sensibility of writers like Helen Maria Williams with the conservative sensibility of figures like Edmund Burke. Jones notes that Burke’s writing focuses on delineating and upholding the “traditional social responsibilities” of a community (*Radical Sensibility* 16). For Burke, this community is identified vis-à-vis hierarchy, family, and local bonds (“Helen Maria Williams” 4). However, Jones explains, Williams’s texts argue for a radical egalitarian notion of loyalty to the idea of the “widest communal good” (“Helen Maria Williams” 4).

For Williams, the desire to produce the “widest communal good” was demonstrated in the post-Revolutionary practice of renouncing one’s title. While the chasm between classes in ancient France was spurred by the system of nobility, in *Letters* Williams praises the National Assembly for abolishing the nobility and the French citizens who gave up their titles. Williams frequently writes of the injustice of self-interest that encourages hereditary rank, of “the absurdity of converting the rewards of personal merit into the inheritance of those who had perhaps so little claim to honours,

that they were a sort of oblique reproach on their character and conduct” (78). Rather, she lauds the integrity of those of supreme “generous affections” who “have gloried in sacrificing titles, fortune, and even the personal ornaments . . . for the common cause” (79) of equality. While titles bolster a communal identity based on the segregation and fracture of class position and social status, a rejection of such a mechanized system emboldens the “liberality of sentiment” that is concerned with “general sympathy” and equality. In Williams’s rewriting of sensibility, possessing a “liberality of sentiment” is more than a revered character trait; it is the essential element that allows a person to be cognizant of and actively respond to social injustice. If one does not have a liberality of sentiment, or fine sensibility, one cannot enact justice. In *Letters*, this critical connection is embodied in Mons. du Fossé, who embodies fine sensibility and justice, and his father, the Baron du Fossé, who is emotionless and cruel.⁶

The Baron is a material representation of the severe dangers of insensibility and a self-enclosed heart.⁷ Although it is Mons. du Fossé who is subjected to a cave-like prison after the Baron has his son jailed for marrying a woman below the family’s social class, the isolated, dark, cold dungeon may be viewed as a metaphor for the Baron, and, more specifically, for the way the Baron is emotionally cut off from his fellow-creatures. Completely lacking sensibility, the Baron represents the isolating captivity and

⁶ Deborah Kennedy has described William’s story of the du Fossés as “a paradigmatic revolutionary narrative” (69).

⁷ As I discuss in chapter 3, there is a striking similarity in the way tyrannical insensibility leads to cruel injustice as embodied by Williams’s Baron du Fossé and Godwin’s Squire Tyrrel.

segregation of the “aristocrate” mentality that prevailed throughout the *ancien régime*.

Using language pertaining to sensibility, social stratification, and the ideology of pre-Revolutionary France, Williams explains that the Baron is enclosed by self-interest and motivated by the preservation of his familial title, wealth, and consolidation of power:

The endearing name of father conveyed no transport to *his* heart, which, being wrapt up in stern insensibility, was cold even to the common feelings of nature.

The Baron’s austerity was not indeed confined to his son, but extended to all of his dependants. Formed by nature for the support of the antient government of France, he maintained his aristocratic rights with unrelenting severity, ruled his feudal tenures with a rod of iron, and considered the lower order of people as a set of beings whose existence was tolerated merely for the use of the nobility. The poor, he believed, were only born for suffering; and he determined, as far as in him lay, not to deprive them of their natural inheritance. (115)

The Baron may be seen as a unitary, isolated entity who individuates himself through the violence of separation and autocratic reign. He is “the emblem of the institutions [Williams] opposed,” a self-enclosed figure who “emphatically rejects any sentimental role of ‘father’” (Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams* 70). The Baron clings to the rule of law of the *ancien régime* and the ethos of segregation underpinning that law.

Sharply contrasting to the Baron is the younger du Fossé, who wholly embodies the new, democratic France and is a material representation of the liberty of passion and the zeal for an equalizing force. Indeed, even when the Baron offers his son physical freedom if Mons. renounces his marriage, his son refuses, preferring to remain a man characterized by fine sensibility rather than enjoy pleasant physical surroundings. Reinventing the relationship between members of a community so as to replace singular difference with communal feeling and collective identity, Mons. du Fossé considers his

land tenants to be family and is lauded as doing nothing but good by the peasants who live in his district. Returning once again to paternal language, albeit this time to praise the good will of Mons. du Fossé against the tyranny of the Baron, Williams notes that “Mons. du F— endeavors to banish misery from his possessions. His tenants consider him as a father, and, ‘when the eye sees him it blesses him’” (139). Deborah Kennedy has characterized Mons. du Fossé as exemplifying the “responsibility and affection” of an “ideal father” (*Helen Maria Williams* 70). However, I read Mons. du Fossé as a more radical pronouncement of Williams’s use of sensibility. A paradigmatic figure in *Letters*, he personifies the way in which a heightened regard for others can materially affect the rights and liberties of the community at large.

Mons. du Fossé embodies the egalitarian ethos at the heart of Williams’s sensibility, and she is unapologetic in her effusive valorization of him. She openly exclaims that her “love of the French revolution is, the natural result of this sympathy, and therefore my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart” (91). Williams praises the leaders of the French revolution as being people who, like Mons. du Fossé, intimately understand the human heart and do not trust only the “force of reason” (90). Williams’s insistence that radical social change comes not through reason alone has prompted some scholars to establish a dichotomy between Williams’s construction of aesthetic categories and those constructed by many of her contemporaries. For example, Steven Blakemore has argued that Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft display antithetical aesthetics in that Wollstonecraft privileges reason and judgment and Williams relies on

emotion and the heart (163).⁸ However, other scholars, such as Chris Jones, have argued that reason is a natural extension of—rather than an antagonistic reaction to—sensibility (*Radical Sensibility* 16). Adela Pinch has explained the relationship between understanding and passion during the eighteenth century by commenting that “empiricism allow[ed] emotion to be a new way of knowing” (*Strange Fits of Passion* 19). The mandate for the recognition of natural rights that lies at the heart of Williams’s aesthetics complicates such a stark opposition between reason and emotion.

R. S. White argues in *Natural Rights and the Birth of Romanticism in the 1790s* that emotion and reason are both folded into natural rights discourse: “When the issue of natural rights is placed at the centre of analysis, ‘sentimentality’ and rationality emerge as not always or necessarily antithetical, but as compatible. What is rational is also emotionally satisfying” (4). In her use of sensibility, Williams openly describes the aesthetic category as a driving force behind the seismic change in the politics of communal and egalitarian rights. Again turning her comments to her “friend,” Mons. du Fossé, Williams continues:

With respect to myself, I must acknowledge, that, in my admiration for the revolution in France, I blend the feelings of private friendship with my sympathy in public blessings; since the old constitution is connected in my mind with the image of a friend confined in the gloomy recesses of a dungeon, and pining in hopeless captivity; while, with the new constitution, I unite the soothing idea of his return to prosperity, honours, and happiness. (93)

⁸ The characterization of Wollstonecraft as being hostile to sensibility, and of sensibility being an aesthetic mode in opposition to a reason-based rhetorical approach, is a characterization that I dispute in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Lamenting her friend's physical captivity under the hand of ancient tyranny as punishment for crossing class boundaries and uniting with a woman of "exquisite sensibility," yet "obscure birth," Williams again connects political freedom with passionate and cooperative sympathy (*Letters* 116-117).

Just as the representations of the Baron and Mons. du Fossé underscore how Williams links emotional accessibility and freedom, Williams's use of metaphors and personification to describe the figure of Liberty from the French and English perspectives further elucidates this connection. Williams states: "Upon the whole, liberty appears in France adorned with the freshness of youth, and is loved with the ardour of passion. In England she is seen in her matron state, and, like other ladies at that period, is beheld with sober veneration" (93). For Williams, liberty springs most profoundly from "the ardour of passion" and must be safeguarded and encouraged not just in the privacy of intimate familial relationships but in the public space of wider communal exchange. Indeed, while physical demonstrations of emotion (such as weeping) had long been considered a private affair, Williams's use of personification linking Lady Liberty with "the ardour of passion" resituates sensibility into the public domain. In "Poetry, Sentiment, and Sensibility," Jennifer Keith explains: "To make ideas into persons, to enlist the reader's capacity to see them in the mind's eye, puts flesh and blood on what could otherwise seem empty abstractions. Thus, personification links images of persons with important concepts circulating in the culture" (132).

Williams describes sympathy as if it were a material structure that moves among individuals and binds them in collective identity rather than as an abstract, intangible

emotion. Deborah Kennedy has noted the communal components of Williams's sensibility, explaining that Williams "considers sensibility as compassionate responsiveness, which provides a foundation for human relationship" and that Williams stresses the "communal nature of sensibility" ("Storms of Sorrow" 87). Explaining the virus-like quality of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sensibility, Adela Pinch notes that feelings were characterized as "transpersonal" and "as autonomous entities that do not always belong to individuals but rather wander extravagantly from one person to another" (*Strange Fits of Passion* 3). For Williams, sympathy is "caught from heart to heart with irresistible energy, fills every eye with tears, and throbs in every bosom" (*Letters* 90). The ability to be moved to act and understand others as an integral component of one's own self is essential in Williams's egalitarian ethics and aesthetics. In *Letters*, Williams characterizes the French citizens as active and collaborative participants in the "new constitution," and contrasts these citizens against the inhabitants of "a certain great metropolis," presumably London, "who consider apathy and negligence as the test of good breeding" (78).

Williams's valorization of sympathetic fervor is highlighted in her poem "To Sensibility" (1786), in which she praises the communal benevolence that sensibility engenders even as it produces deep suffering for the person of sensibility:

Tho' she the mourner's grief to calm,
 Still shares each pang they feel,
 And, like the tree distilling balm,
 Bleeds, others wounds to heal. (11.1-4; 65)

Williams's articulation of sensibility rejects the notion of a self-enclosed, unitary self and privileges the idea of the communal. Despite the burden of sympathy that sensibility entails, the speaker unambiguously states: "No cold exemption from [sensibility's] pain / I ever wish'd to know" (2.1-2; 63). Indeed, the speaker is puzzled that anyone would elect to feel less as a way to preserve individual happiness at the expense of "friendship, sympathy, and love" (21.3; 67)⁹:

Yet who would hard INDIFFERENCE choose,
 Whose breast no tears can steep?
 Who, for her apathy, would lose
 The sacred power to weep? (16.1-4; 66)

For Williams, the ability to weep demonstrates one's acknowledgement of relational consciousness; those who are unmoved in the face of inequality or suffering (such as the Baron du Fossé) are individuals in the negative sense of being closed to and isolated from the "amiable community" (*Letters* 90) of citizens.

Williams's "amiable community" complicates the individual-versus-community dichotomy. For example, Williams opens *Letters* by explaining that she arrived in Paris on the day before the Fête de la Fédération, a celebration of the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Williams emphasizes how in preparing the scene for the Fête, the French citizens come together with a new-found enthusiasm for a common and egalitarian identity:

⁹ "To Sensibility" is in fact a rebuttal to the 1750s poem "A Prayer for Indifference" by Frances Greville; in the poem, the speaker pleads to be unburdened of sensibility because of the extreme states of suffering that accompany it (Todd 61-62).

Twenty days labour, animated by the enthusiasm of the people, accomplished what seemed to require the toil of years. Already in the Champ de Mars the distinctions of rank were forgotten; and inspired by the same spirit, the highest and lowest orders of citizens gloried in taking up the spade, and assisting the persons employed in a work on which the common welfare of the state depended. Ladies took the instruments of labour in their hands, and removed a little of the earth, that they might be able to boast that they also had assisted in the preparations at the Champ de Mars; and a number of old soldiers were seen voluntarily bestowing on their country the last remains of their strength. A young Abbé of my acquaintance told me, that the people beat a drum at the door of the convent where he lived, and obliged the Superior to let all the Monks come out and work in the Champ de Mars. (65)

These citizens reject the artificial fracturing and traditional demarcations of social standing, gender, or religious practice. They are united in their common purpose—the celebration of egalitarian liberty—and are moved to act, sacrificing even “the last remains of their strength,” because of their passion and benevolence.

Williams further extends the collective nature of identity when, still discussing the scene of cooperative expression and celebration, she expressly rejects the notion of a personal individuation erected under the banner of national affiliation. She explains that despite her English citizenship, she is far from an “indifferent witness” to the celebration of revolutionary equality. For Williams, the common humanity that is shared by all individuals rises above the legal delineations of geographic citizenship. Individuals are not “French” or “English” in their valorization of the fall of the *ancien régime*, as this valorization “was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world” (69). Williams explains how, “but a sojourner in their land,” she joyfully participated in the French people’s happiness and merged her own cries of “Vive

la nation!” with “the universal voice” of communal existence (73). Neil Fraistat and Susan Lanser have noted that Williams considered anti-Revolutionary hostility such as Burke’s to be based in “anti-French bigotry” and “a proprietary attitude to liberty and a nationalist intolerance of difference” (36). In opposition to Burke’s notion that a select few “gentlemen” are endowed with the authority to set jurisprudential and social parameters for the sake of all, Williams promotes sensibility as a way to extend cooperative and participatory action to a collectively governing community (Fraistat and Lanser 32). Williams not only tolerates difference but underscores what is the same—namely, common humanity and naturally-endowed universal rights—in different members of a community in her aesthetics and ethics of sensibility.

Highlighting the monolithic quality of English liberty compared to the representative, self-governing spirit of post-Revolutionary French liberty, Williams exclaims that the “ungenerous” English “wish to make a monopoly of liberty” (92). Williams’s use of the phrase “monopoly of liberty” suggests the importance that some English citizens, such as Burke, continued to place on ownership and restricting the communal voice. In contrast, a defining element of Williams’s sensibility is its underlying egalitarian ethos. Chris Jones has commented on the shifting definition of community by radical writers of sensibility such as Williams, who privileged inclusivity over the exclusivity favored by other prominent contemporary writers like Burke. Jones notes that radical writers of sensibility emphasized “action and intervention,” and that while they gave priority to the passions, “[i]n championing individual sensibility they affirmed the authority of personal experience over precept, custom and tradition” (“Helen

Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility” 4). He explains that such writers challenged the “hierarchical distinctions of Burke’s grand community of the living and the dead,” a community in which “feudal loyalties” masked the extreme injustice of class inequality (4). For Williams, sensibility is not just an aestheticized account of individual feeling, but rather a practical model for participating in communal equality and recognizing collective identity. Williams rejects the sin of separation and characterizes individual identity formation as rooted in community, as communal subjectivity; this rejection is not limited to her use of sensibility. Williams’s construction of the sublime also announces her egalitarian, communal project. Flatly rejecting Burke’s theory of the sublime—which privileges segregation, distance, and limitation—the aesthetic structure of Williams’s sublime mirrors the phenomenological and ontological structure of communal subjectivity in its egalitarian merging of what has been tyrannically and artificially torn apart.

The sublime as communal subjectivity

Subjectivity possesses a necessary place in aesthetics, as one may not divorce human reception from aesthetics; a scene, object, or event becomes aesthetic only via human cognition.¹⁰ Helen Maria Williams highlights the cognitive component of aesthetics by transferring aesthetic possibility onto the human body: in her texts, humans

¹⁰ This is not to say, of course, that aesthetics need always be connected to ethics. My statement refers only to the discourse of events that are necessarily aestheticized via their reception by humans.

themselves become capable of inspiring aesthetic and ethical reactions. Further, it is human benevolence, and, specifically, human attempts to remedy injustice, that express the most supreme—and indeed the most sublime—event. As I will demonstrate, in *Letters* it is one's fine sensibility that provides access to a heightened awareness of and egalitarian response to injustice, a response that Williams characterizes as sublime. That Williams uses both sensibility and the sublime to argue for the same radical effect demonstrates how she blurs the line between these two aesthetic categories, or, as Ellison notes, the way in which Williams's sublime "is made contiguous to and sometimes indistinguishable from sentiment" (199). The necessary component of egalitarian ethics that Williams infuses into her construction of the sublime is a sharp break from the tradition of the sublime from which Williams was operating, most notably the Burkean tradition.

In *Letters*, Williams's articulation of the sublime event stresses radical human interaction and egalitarian exchange; in contrast, a rigid power structure underlies Burke's articulation of the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke states that he "know[s] of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (59). Burke qualifies this statement by explaining that vast power alone will not induce a sublime response, as the power must be of the kind that is associated with destruction and suffering. To highlight the difference between power that is sublime and that which is "by no means grand," Burke compares an ox with a bull. He characterizes the ox as an animal of "vast strength," but also of innocence and serviceability who is "not at all dangerous," and, thus,

“contemptible” and not capable of inducing the sublime (60). A bull, on the other hand, possesses strength “of another kind”: a bull is “often very destructive,” yet is “seldom . . . of any use in our business”; thus, “the idea of a bull is therefore great, and it has frequently a place in sublime descriptions, and elevating comparisons” (60). He notes that the same terror that must accompany sublime power is what makes those who are in positions of authority, such as commanders and kings, so awe inspiring, and lauds the appropriateness of the title “dread majesty” (62).

Burke’s theory is based on terror, self-preservation, and an ethos of limitation and separation between the sublime event and its human observer. He explicitly links the sublime to what is painful and terrible:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (36)

Burke argues that just as “pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death; nay, what generally makes pain itself . . . more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors” (36). As death is the annihilation of self—and thus of subjectivity—it follows that for Burke, the sublime and death, or, more specifically, the avoidance of this “king of terrors,” are intrinsically linked. As Burke bluntly exclaims, “the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation” (79). Burke’s statement conflating self-preservation and the sublime

underscores the contrast between his theory and Williams's theory of the sublime, in which she maintains that the sublime is invoked not by conserving and perpetuating the unitary self, but by selfless acts that benefit the "common good" and unify disparate groups.

Burke's contention that self-preservation is at the center of the sublime also pertains to the elements of limitation and distance inherent in his aesthetic theory, elements that run counter to Williams's aesthetics. Burke explains: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (36-7). Qualifying his argument that pain and danger are the supreme sources of the sublime, Burke describes how separation between the observer and the sublime object or a limitation on the vastness of the sublime object reassures the observer of his or her own survival in the face of potential totalization.

Not only is Burke's aesthetic theory grounded in separation, but so too is the way in which he presents this theory. Rigidly pulling apart notions of the sublime and the beautiful, Burke catalogs what qualifies as "beautiful" as opposed to what constitutes "sublime":

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their

causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions. (113-14)

Burke's qualifications for the categories of the beautiful and the sublime are exacting and his language commands that these categories should not be forgotten. This directive is not followed by Williams, who readily blurs the lines between beauty and the sublime. Fraistat and Lanser have noted that "Williams interprets the Revolution through a set of fluid aesthetic categories that privilege the beauty and harmony of the Revolution as a new kind of sublimity, shifting the terrible aspects of the sublime—terror and horror—to an inhumane *ancien régime*" (46). Burke's sublime is experienced by isolated individuals and infused with an antisocial ethos (Ferguson 3, 8); further, Burke restricts "the passion of love" solely to the category of the beautiful (Burke 102).

Burke's prescriptive rhetoric foregrounding segregation, isolation, and dominance underscores the extreme difference between his articulation of sublime power and that offered by Williams. For Williams, it is not the preservation of unequal power structures and the capacity for dominance that is sublime; what is most sublime is the evisceration of distinctions of rank for the protection of the "common welfare" (65) of the people. Burke's insistence that pain and terror are at the root of the sublime and are the strongest emotions the mind can feel is flatly rejected by Williams, whose articulation of sublimity is based on the fervor felt in the face of human collective benevolence and equality. Williams situates the source of the sublime in benevolent, cooperative sympathy. She is deeply thankful that she is able to "witness an event so sublime as the French

Revolution,” which has inspired “universal love,” “liberality of sentiment,” and “amiable communit[ies]” (90-91).

In sharp contrast to Burke, Williams locates the source of the sublime not in an exterior presence but rather in the sympathetic bond between individuals, in the “amiable community” bound by “universal love” (90); thus, the elements of separation and limit are anathema to Williams’s sublime. Commenting on Williams’s communal aesthetics as it pertains to the sublime, Fraistat and Lanser have explained that for Williams, “[s]ublidity is possible only through revolutionary principles in which a shared emotional state reflects a shared politics” (46). This shared politics is one based upon equality and common justice and not on singular, unitary preservation and progression. Similarly, Chris Jones has distinguished Burke’s aesthetics of the sublime from Williams’s: Burke’s sublime “stimulated fear and protective preservation of the . . . ego within established power relations which it further consolidated” (“Travelling Hopefully” 93), while Williams’s “sublime of radical sensibility” was founded upon “an extension of human faculties, especially of the ‘social passions’ that would realise new forms of society” (93-94). While these critics have recognized the connection between the sublime and communal politics (Fraistat and Lanser) and communal social bonds (Jones) in Williams’s construction of the sublime, the communal element of Williams’s sublime is even more expansive: it not only encourages the breaking down of oppressive segregations of power and wealth in the community, but also of notions of unitary, enclosed selfhood.

Just as Williams shifts the focus of the sublime away from Burke's rigid separation and categorization onto a sublimity based on human benevolence, she also reimagines how material objects signifying equality and community come to represent the sublime. The recasting of sublime objects also parallels the communal structure of her aesthetics, for objects representing the democratic and participatory shift in the political system are akin to the emphasis on human exchange and community in Williams's sublime. For example, Fraistat and Lanser have explained how while the Bastille was the ultimate symbol of ancient terror, for Williams it is the ruins of this prison that become sublime; the ruins as a symbol represent the new participatory government, and as a material object can be enjoyed by all communal participants regardless of social standing (46).¹¹ The ruins thus function in *Letters* as a material allusion to the notion of collectivity.

Williams's Letter V suggests the same connection between sublime ruins and communal subjectivity. In this letter, Williams relates how the prince Mons. de Chartres, who had renounced his title, came across a wooden cage made by order of Louis XIV to imprison a French citizen who had ridiculed the conquests of the King and which still housed prisoners. In striking contrast to the leaders of the *ancien régime*, Mons. de Chartres "beheld with horror this instrument of tyranny" (80) and smashed the cage to

¹¹ In *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape*, Anne Janowitz reads a democratic ethos foregrounding the "ruin poems" of writers such as Volney and Wordsworth. Janowitz explains that for Volney, physical remnants of traditional markers of power, such as palaces, serve as a warning to the ruling class and "the signal of the defeat of power, as well as the possibility of an international social transformation" (118).

pieces with a hatchet. Williams describes this sublime action as reflecting “the highest honor on his humanity” (79) and lauds him as a “democratic Prince” (78). Indeed, Mons. du Chartres, like Mons. du Fossé, embody the way in which sensibility in an individual can lead to sublime acts of communal identity formation.

Williams opens and closes *Letters Written in France* with an explicit reference to her unique brand of communal ethics and aesthetics. In the first paragraph of Letter I, Williams describes the Fête de la Fédération as “the most sublime spectacle which, perhaps, was ever represented on the theatre of this earth” (63). In the next paragraph, Williams notes that it is the emotive, rather than the rational, component of the sublime that is most potent for her and declares that it is “much easier to feel what is sublime than to paint it” (63). As Julie Ellison has remarked, Williams’s sublime announces an aesthetics founded upon sympathy and “ethical assent” (200). She characterizes what Williams finds to be sublime as “not a specific aesthetic or emotional structure, but rather the simultaneous experience of sublime associations, sentimental (including erotic) sensations, and ethical fervor” (199). Indeed, Williams characterizes the sublime as the quality of the national ethos of equality and justice permeating revolutionary France one year after the fall of the Bastille. In Letter II, Williams clarifies that what made the spectacle of the Fête sublime was the feeling of “common welfare” unifying the divergent economic, gender, and religious classes of people; that it was sight of the humans and their benevolent feelings for one another and not of the celebratory pageantry that was sublime: “I Promised to send you a description of the federation: but it is not to be described! One must have been present, to form any judgment of a scene,

the sublimity of which depended much less on its external magnificence than on the effect it produced on the minds of the spectators” (64). Williams continues that the Fête “connected the enthusiasm of moral sentiment with the solemn pomp of religious ceremonies; which addressed itself at once to the imagination, the understanding, and the heart!” (65).

Similarly, Williams ends *Letters* with an example of how the passion of sensibility leads to an act of sublimity. Williams relates how one French aristocrat, who had taken refuge in England, “has lost his fortune, his rank, all his high expectations, and yet who has the generosity to applaud the revolution, and the magnanimity to reconcile himself to personal calamities, from the consideration of general good” (149). This kind of “liberality of sentiment” is what Williams lauds in *Letters*, and is what leads her to proclaim the French Revolution to be a “sublime event” (91). Transforming an historical event into a sublime one lifts the event out of a chronologically fixed moment and emphasizes the propelling forces behind the event. In this instance, these forces are equality and common justice, which are the same forces upon which Williams’s communal subjectivity is based. Fraistat and Lanser have explained that Williams depicts the Revolution as “a new kind of sublimity” (46). Rendering aesthetic categories open and fluid, Williams “synthesizes the sublime with the beautiful by liberating the sublime from pain and terror and allowing its grandeur to be informed with pleasurable participatory sympathy” (Fraistat and Lanser 46). Fraistat and Lanser also note how “[a]s the Revolution dissolves hierarchies of sex, condition, and structures of governance, so it collapses the old aesthetic dichotomy” (46). The guiding principles of the French

Revolution (at least circa 1790 and the publication of *Letters*) mirror the prominent communal elements of Williams's construction of sensibility and the sublime.

The last letter also demonstrates how Williams revises not just aesthetic categories but revolutionizes notions of what constitutes an individual. Locating the potential for egalitarian political progression in the structures of the sublime and communal subjectivity, Williams writes:

Perhaps the improvements which mankind may be capable of making in the art of politics, may have some resemblance to those they have made in the art of navigation. Perhaps our political plans may hitherto have been somewhat like those ill-constructed misshapen vessels, which, unfit to combat with the winds and waves, were only used by the ancients to convey the warriors of one country to despoil and ravage another neighboring state; which only served to produce an intercourse of hostility, a communication of injury, an exchange of rapine and devastation. (149)

The discourse of the destruction wreaked by the ancients against their neighbors harkens back to the way in which Williams characterizes the devastating effects of hostility between the Royalists and Revolutionaries in “An American Tale,” in which the speakers, through their fine sensibilities, are moved to construct a collective subjectivity based on hospitality. Similarly, the discourse of a separation that can be bridged via aesthetic guidance strikingly resembles the way in which the warring families of the “stranger” Edward and his lover Amelia forge a “filial bond.” Indeed, Williams's ethical aesthetics is located at the center of the most private, domestic relationships as well as at the heart of the most public, global exchange, as both structures rely on human—and for Williams collective and just—intercourse and communication.

Rather than the ancients' "intercourse of hostility" and "communication of injury," Williams's aesthetics is one of hospitality and benevolence, or, as Williams describes it, is one of becoming "a citizen of the world" (*Letters* 69). To be "a citizen of the world" is to recognize the communal bonds we share *because of*—not *in spite of*—our differences. Suggesting that people consider "the art of navigation" to spur a revised understanding about "the art of politics," Williams urges her readers to look toward a new approach to justice:

[I]t may possibly be within the compass of human ability to form a system of politics, which, like a modern ship of discovery, built upon principles that defy the opposition of the tempestuous elements ("and passions are the elements of life"—) instead of yielding to their fury makes them subservient to their purpose, and sailing sublimely over the untracked ocean, unites those together whom nature seemed for ever to have separated, and throws a line of connection across the divided world. (149)

Williams's new approach to justice—to the "line of connection across the divided world"—is not found in institutionalized government alone. Rather, justice is located in the human exchange of sensibility, and in the sublime communal subjectivity sensibility cultivates. The sublime, then, is not a historically fixed, chronological marker that designates a singular event. The sublime is a multiple opening, a multiple possibility of connection, a multiple possibility of justice.

CHAPTER III

“MY OWN SENSE OF JUSTICE”: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT’S
MARIA, NATURAL RIGHTS, AND “SUBLIME SENSIBILITY”

So great a favourite is the female sex of the laws of England.

— William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*

My main object [in writing *Maria* is] the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society.

— Mary Wollstonecraft, Preface to *Maria*

Aesthetics, agency, justice

Upon first inquiry, it may seem that Mary Wollstonecraft’s engagement with sensibility stands in direct opposition to that of Helen Maria Williams. Whereas Williams unequivocally advocates for the place of passion in any juridical paradigm, the mainstream critical narrative continues to characterize Wollstonecraft as privileging reason over emotion and harshly critiquing the rhetoric of sensibility. For example, discussing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Adela Pinch notes that Wollstonecraft regards sensibility as “a key factor in the degradation of women” (“Sensibility” 56); Gary Kelly posits that Wollstonecraft uses her second *Vindication* to refute the Western philosophical tradition that subjugates women to the physically oriented arena of the passions and to call on women to exercise reason and suppress passion (26). Similarly, Jacqueline LeBlanc argues that in *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Men (1790), Wollstonecraft “condemns the culture of sensibility for replacing the rational mind with the emotional heart as the primary seat of moral guidance” (29), and that Wollstonecraft saw sensibility, or “the affective front,” as “the pernicious agent” that furthered a powerful monarchy (28).¹

In this chapter, I refute the prevailing characterization that holds up Wollstonecraft as the anti-sensibility (and, by extension, anti-Williams) writer and demonstrate how in the posthumously published *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), “sublime sensibility” (70) plays a critical role in linking individual feeling and thought with communal social change. Sublime sensibility, as Wollstonecraft conflates the terms in the novel, is not a self-contained aesthetic category; it is a mode of human exchange that prompts individuals to act according to mandates about communal natural rights and not according to dictates of positive, written law. Sublime sensibility is a gateway to social justice. Addressing the gap in scholarship pertaining to *Maria*, I establish how the novel not only reconsiders the relationship between emotion and reason, but dramatically recasts the faculty of feeling as a way to recognize injustice and spur revolutionary social change. As Claudia Johnson has acknowledged,

¹ I counter that Wollstonecraft’s treatment of sensibility in her first *Vindication* is more nuanced, particularly in the way in which feeling becomes folded into communal benevolence. While I touch upon the role of the passions vis-à-vis juridical concerns in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* below, it is to argue that some of the radical assertions about jury nullification and civil disobedience that Wollstonecraft makes in *Maria*, the focus of this chapter, can be seen in nascent forms in the first *Vindication*.

Wollstonecraft's novels have received "scant attention" in Romantic-era critical discourse (189), but, I posit, *Maria* deserves more than "scant attention."

Maria deepens our understanding of how closely related aesthetics, juridical, and interpersonal human concerns really are. The novel centers around Maria, whose inhumane, insensible yet law-abiding husband has Maria imprisoned in an insane asylum in an attempt to gain control of her inherited fortune. A scathing critique of the contemporary laws of *coverture*, Wollstonecraft's narrative uses some of the traditional rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime to make a radical argument. The novel contends that sensibility allows a person to access a sublime moment of understanding about the communal nature of identity and the ethical imperative to remedy unjust social laws even if that remedy involves breaking the law and acting according to one's "own sense of justice" (144). *Maria* is a crucial text not just for Wollstonecraft scholars, but for those inquiring into early articulations of egalitarian social movements (namely, those pertaining to gender rights, human rights, and legally sanctioned, culturally reinforced subjugation); further, the novel offers significant insight into how late eighteenth-century texts began to suggest the existence of an overlap between "public" social movements and "private" (that is, removed from juridical concerns) aesthetic categories. It is Wollstonecraft's novel, rather than her nonfiction treatises, that most acutely exemplifies complex notions of the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime to argue for social change. Rather than exiling from her fiction the sociopolitical topics and "public" discourse of her treatises, Wollstonecraft explicitly argues for social change within the supposedly private form of the novel and via certain aesthetic experiences.

Wollstonecraft did not always place sublime sensibility at the center of radical juridical discourse. However, in the relatively short period of ten years, she seems to have profoundly reconfigured her ideas about the most effective way to articulate social wrongs and spur public change. In her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), Wollstonecraft largely excoriates the aesthetics of sensibility, casting the protagonist as possessing a “strong and clear” understanding of the world only when she is “not clouded by her feelings” and serving as “the slave of compassion” (9). Although *Mary* does present glimpses of a socially activist element attendant in the sublime, the sublime experiences described in the novel primarily lead to moments that are personally and emotionally fortifying but that are not communally engaged, to moments in which the protagonist “learn[s] the luxury of doing good” (11). Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* strengthens the positive connection between aesthetic categories and juridical concerns and hints at the argument she will more radically develop in *Maria*, namely, that there is an essential link between sublime sensibility and natural rights.

In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft fully articulates how sensibility and the sublime can lead one to recognize and resist social injustice and consider how private relationships can influence public changes. Just as Helen Maria Williams roots sensibility and the sublime in communal, egalitarian ideals, Wollstonecraft emancipates sensibility and the sublime from aesthetic categories that privilege isolation and places them within the public discourse of social change. *Maria* draws compelling associations between justice, sensibility, and the sublime, and transforms what was traditionally an aesthetics of personal and even isolated feeling into an ethical mandate for public action. Not only

does the novel alter sensibility and the sublime into sites of political and personal transformation, but it also provides a practical model of how persons, especially women, can accomplish this transformation. Namely, in the most radical textual enactment of the interplay between aesthetics, justice, and personal agency in *Maria*, the protagonist argues for the importance of jury nullification and civil disobedience to renounce “the partial laws and customs of society” (59). Both jury nullification and civil disobedience are modes of resistance propelled by emotion and reason. In the Preface to *Maria*, Wollstonecraft states that the critical danger in a woman’s being forced to steel herself against the humanizing affections of sensibility is not that it weakens her heart but that it degrades her mind. Thus, she makes a direct link between *insensibility* and irrationality, a link that runs counter to the critical narrative that she is a staunch advocate for a reason-only based moral and political philosophy.

“The luxury of doing good” versus “sublime sensibility”

Despite the activist expressions of sensibility embodied in *Maria*, the idea that one is moved to aid another through benevolent sympathy has a darker side, one in which sensibility is represented as diminishing rather than expanding one’s sense of agency and communal commitment. Published ten years before *Maria*, *Mary* demonstrates that emotional excess can become a form of isolationism and solipsism. After fleeing England to delay a pre-arranged marriage to a man whom she does not love, Mary, a young woman of extreme sensibility, falls in love with Henry, who is in declining health. After Henry dies, an overwrought Mary returns to England and devotes her life to

charitable works. Rather than being emboldened by the sublime sensibility Maria comes to know, Mary becomes dysfunctional and ineffective when sensibility overcomes her. She seems deeply plagued by any show of interpersonal conflict, moral transgression, or social inequity:

Other causes also contributed to disturb her repose: her mother's lukewarm manner of performing her religious duties, filled her with anguish; and when she observed her father's vices, the unbidden tears would flow. She was miserable when beggars were driven from the gate without being relieved; if she could do it unperceived, she would give them her own breakfast, and feel gratified, when, in consequence of it, she was pinched by hunger. (9)

Not only do these strong emotional responses stifle her progressive social action, for Mary “was too much the creature of impulse, and the slave of compassion” (9), but they glamorize and “aestheticize” the realities of the crippling social problems of the day (such as oppressive gender relations, restrictive religious orthodoxy, and severe class inequalities).

Not only can the aesthetics of sensibility serve to desensitize people to the authentic suffering of others, but it can also act as a mode of injustice by objectifying the sufferer for the benefit of the spectator.² Using the rhetoric of traditional sensibility,

² Robert Markley has argued that in addition to the injustice that derives from this “theatrics” of sensibility, the “ideology of sentiment” also enacts injustice because it “relegate[s] women to the status of perpetual victims, biologically constrained by their hypersensitivity and emotionalism” while it “valorizes masculine sensitivity as a virtue” (212). Markley also comments that in its initial articulation by Shaftesbury, sensibility was characterized as an upper-class virtue, but that writers in the eighteenth century

Wollstonecraft characterizes Mary's mother, Eliza, as bestowing care and pity on her two helpless dogs, whom she considers to be a "resource" for inspiring charitable emotion. Eliza's benevolence does not arise from genuine compassion; rather, "it proceeded from vanity, it gave her an opportunity of lisping out the prettiest French expressions of ecstatic fondness, in accents that had never been attuned by tenderness" (6). Although Mary's benevolence is deeper and extends further than her mother's, the reader still understands this benevolence to be primarily a medium of self-fortification. Mary's "sensibility prompt[s] her to search for an object to love ..." (8), and she wanders from her family's estate to "the huts of the poor fishermen, who supported their numerous children by their precarious labour" (11). There, Mary denies herself "every childish gratification" so as to "relieve the necessities of the inhabitants," which would cause her heart to "dance with joy when she had relieved their wants, or afforded them pleasure" (11). Similarly, Mary becomes more emotionally invigorated and physically beautiful when she helps others: "the sweet tears of benevolence frequently moistened her eyes, and gave them a sparkle which, exclusive of that, they had not . . ." (11). In her "rhapsody on sensibility," Mary declares that sensibility "'is indeed the foundation of all our happiness,'" and ponders "'[i]s any sensual gratification to be compared to that of feeling the eyes moistened after having comforted the unfortunate?'" (43). In *Mary*, sensibility lacks rigorous human exchange and activist elements, offering instead the opportunity for Mary to learn "the luxury of doing good" (11).

"expand the ranks of the innately virtuous and good-natured" to include members of the emerging middle class.

The idea that doing good is a personal luxury that enervates one's sense of agency rather than developing an empowering, communal ethical imperative goes to the heart of Wollstonecraft's critique of sensibility in *Mary*. The conclusion that Wollstonecraft is denigrating sensibility rather than advocating for it stems largely from the way the text conforms to the novelistic conventions of the literature of sensibility; namely, the text depicts an overwrought, politically disengaged heroine who is enslaved and ultimately ruined by sensibility. The narrator notes that "sentimental novels" allow a reader the pleasure of dwelling on love scenes without having to think, a process that, the narrator sarcastically states, would merely "contaminate[]" the reader's mind. Indeed, as Syndy Conger has argued, although Mary may have a kind heart, "[t]he idea of social activism never occurs to Mary; rather than reform the tainted world, she works to present a morally inviolate self to the next one. In consonance with this goal, the virtues Mary cultivates are self-sacrificial and intensely self-directed" (161). And yet there are moments when Wollstonecraft departs from her critical stance regarding the indolence sensibility breeds.

In the Advertisement that opens *Mary*, Wollstonecraft proclaims that she wishes to present a heroine "different from those generally portrayed," and to write "an artless tale, without episodes, [in which] the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed" (3). While sensibility in *Mary* is far from the progressive mode of engagement it becomes in *Maria*, Mary does openly acknowledge that benevolence without activism is ineffective and even solipsistic. While visiting a convent, Mary reflects on the false compassion of the nuns. She concludes that the nuns who believe

themselves to be religious without “exercising benevolence in its most extensive sense, must certainly allow, that their religious duties are practised from selfish principles; how then can they be called good? The pattern of all goodness went about *doing* good.

Wrapped up in themselves, the nuns only thought of inferior gratifications” (25; emphasis in the original). Although Mary herself never considers sensibility to be a gateway for social reform, she, like Wollstonecraft, at least exposes the limitations and dangers of self-serving benevolence.

Similar to her treatment of sensibility in *Mary*, Wollstonecraft also treats the sublime as primarily an aesthetics of isolation and emotional extravagance, but she intimates that there may be a more progressive articulation to be found. In a mocking tone, the narrator explains how “[s]ublime ideas filled [Mary’s] young mind—always connected with devotional sentiments; extemporary effusions of gratitude, and rhapsodies of praise would burst often from her, when she listened to the birds, or pursued the deer” (8). Mixed with the traditional depictions of the sublime, however, there are also moments in which Wollstonecraft signals a more radical construction of the sublime. For example, in a scene where Mary witnesses the rescue of a small vessel at sea, Wollstonecraft suggests that there is a communal element of human interaction and benevolence in the experience of the sublime. Wollstonecraft describes a conventional scene of the sublime in which humans are overpowered by nature and dangle on the precipice of death. Helping to comfort the crew who had just been “on the brink of destruction,” Mary caught “the poor trembling wretches” as they came onto her ship, and “soothed” a female crew member who had fainted upon coming on board (37). The

experience “had gratified [Mary’s] benevolence, and stole her out of herself” (37). The humanitarian element is neglected, however; rather than considering how her sublime interaction could be extended to a sociopolitical context, the experience eventually causes Mary to turn her thoughts to “the great day of judgment,” in which “the Lord Omnipotent will reign, and He will wipe the tearful eye, and support the trembling heart” (37). Mary’s sensibility and experience of the sublime trigger only a desire to wait for the “Lord Omnipotent” to ameliorate actual, human suffering, and lack the activist component that will come to define these aesthetic categories in *Maria*. Ultimately, the heroine in *Mary* only comes to know the palliative “luxury of doing good” and not the transformative “sublime sensibility” the heroine in *Maria* understands.

Introducing the argument that she will more fully develop in *Maria*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft maintains that there is an inextricable connection between sublime sensibility and promoting natural rights for all people. R. S. White has noted that during the 1790s, the emergence of a discourse emphasizing the import of natural rights created an ethics grounded in acknowledging the dignity of one’s own, and, critically, another’s, basic human rights. Wollstonecraft’s first *Vindication* embodies this discourse, suggesting that the behavior that leads to sublime sensibility is triggered not alone by measured reason regarding the natural rights of every person, but also by the energizing emotion of fellow-feeling:

In life, an honest man with a confined understanding is frequently the slave of his habits and the dupe of his feelings, whilst the man with a clearer head and colder heart makes the passions of others bend to his interest; but truly sublime is the character that acts from principle, and governs the inferior springs of activity

without slackening their vigour; whose feelings give vital heat to his resolves, but never hurry him into feverish eccentricities. (6)

It is from the right combination of a reasonable mind and a passionate heart that a person conducts himself or herself with truth in morals; truth in morals, in turn, is “the essence of the sublime” (5). And the essential connection between the head (reason), the heart (passion), and acting with truth in morals (the sublime) is being able to recognize the natural rights of *all* people and acting to preserve these rights by engaging in the human exchange of communal subjectivity.

Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on the unifying, natural rights of all people resembles how Helen Maria Williams, in *Letters Written in France*, characterizes the act of voluntarily divesting oneself of title and rank as the most sublime event. Similarly, just as Williams describes acts of communal egalitarianism through the discourse of aesthetic categories, so too does Wollstonecraft maintain that the commitment to protect the natural rights of oneself and others is grounded in sensibility and the sublime. Refuting Burke’s arguments in *Reflections of the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft charges that his “respect for rank has swallowed up the common feelings of humanity” (16) and exclaims that “all feelings are false and spurious, that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not centred by universal love” (34). Wollstonecraft states that the “respect paid to rank and fortune damps every generous purpose of the soul, and stifles the natural affections on which human contentment ought to be built” (24).

Just as Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* that “respect paid to rank and fortune” can debase the human bonds and social exchange that are

necessary for justice, she similarly asserts that a strict reliance on legal mandates rather than adherence to natural law considerations leads to injustice. The doctrine of natural law holds that some rights (such as, for example, the right to liberty) are so fundamental that they are automatically conferred upon an individual at birth. These rights are considered inalienable and transcend positive, or human-made, laws. As such, natural law doctrine is based upon egalitarian principles that extend to protect the natural rights of *all* people. I argue that this doctrine resides at the center of Wollstonecraft's juridical philosophy in *Vindication*.

Speaking of the rights that flow from the natural order as imposed by God, in *Vindication* Wollstonecraft exclaims that "there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights" (12-13). For example, Wollstonecraft cites slavery as an abomination of a person's fundamental liberty, and laments the practice of politicians to segregate applications of policy from principles of natural justice "with shameful dexterity" (53). Wollstonecraft maintains that one should not follow a law solely because it is recognized as legally operative. She states that "a blind respect for the law is not part of my creed" (19 n.10).³ Rather, one should consider—using reason *and* feeling—questions concerning whether the law enacts an injustice of one's own or another's natural rights. Drawing an explicit distinction between law and justice,

³ In their study of Wollstonecraft's life and work, Ferguson and Todd write about the author's "rigorous sense of justice" (104).

Wollstonecraft argues that certain legislation, such as some of the laws pertaining to heredity rights, should be disavowed because “the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men, and to fence round with awful pomp laws that war with justice” (7).⁴

Although *Vindication* is a nonfiction “epistle,” as Wollstonecraft calls it, the text does not discard all aesthetic considerations in its narrative construction. Wollstonecraft castigates Burke’s rhetoric, accusing him of employing “awful pomp” to mask the injustice of his argument, and contrasts her narrative style against Burke’s. Using the second person to address Burke directly, Wollstonecraft claims that in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke uses “the flowers of rhetoric” (7) to fashion “the gorgeous drapery in which you have enwrapped your tyrannic principles” (38). In contrast, Wollstonecraft argues that she has no need for “courtly insincerity” (5) because her argument speaks to what is universal and communal, not monarchical and “fence[d] round” (7). Indeed, although Wollstonecraft is ostensibly writing directly to Burke, she opens her letter by stating that her argument is not with an individual person but with systematic injustice: “But I war not with an individual when I contend for the *rights of men* ...” (5; emphasis in the original).⁵ By commenting on how Burke deceives his readers by using

⁴ In *Maria*, the “awful pomp” of custom perpetuates injustice. Mallinck notes that for some characters in the novel, “their dread is inherited” and that custom “negatively affects at least three generations of Jemima’s family” (5).

⁵ The “rights of men,” according to Wollstonecraft, is “such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact” (7).

beautiful rhetoric to distort a cultural legacy based on brutal tyranny, Wollstonecraft makes a connection between principles of representation and “natural principles of justice” (52).

Wollstonecraft also draws a connection between representation and communal, natural law in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft exclaims that her arguments are set forth with “the firm *tone* of humanity,” and that she was spurred to write her second *Vindication* based on her “affection for the *whole* human race” (67; emphasis mine). Advocating for more equal education rights for females, she asserts that “this important object” requires her to write prose that is “unaffected” and free of “flowery diction” so she may “persuade by the force of my arguments, [rather] than dazzle by the elegance of my language” (77). Wollstonecraft characterizes “pretty feminine phrases” as tools of oppression that men employ “to soften our slavish dependence,” and unambiguously condemns the culture of sensibility that she believes contributes to female servitude (76). She writes: “despising that weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, [and] that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex” (77).

At first glance it could seem that Wollstonecraft’s condemnation of “flowery diction,” “feminine phrases,” and “exquisite sensibility” supports the critical narrative that she distinctly favors a reason-based (over an emotion-based) approach to juridical concerns. However, in her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft excoriates the *gendered*

culture of sensibility that renders women “vain and helpless” and “in a state of perpetual childhood” (76); she does not reject the notion that one’s heart must act in unison with one’s head, that emotion unlocks reason. Indeed, Wollstonecraft maintains that virtue results when “the passions . . . unfold our reason” (81). Wollstonecraft exclaims that virtue must be supported by genuine sentiment, and she defines virtue as “that sublime morality which makes the habitual breach of one duty a breach of the whole moral law” (229). This early articulation of the relationship between emotion, reason, and acting to protect the natural rights of *all* people will become fully cultivated in *Maria* as sublime sensibility.

In the Preface to *Maria*, Wollstonecraft explicitly states that the “partial laws and customs of society” she seeks to address in the novel are those pertaining to women who have entered into marriage. Perhaps the most explicit textual embodiment of such partial laws and customs is in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), the seminal eighteenth-century legal treatise that explicates the immense body of contemporary law as derived from ancient England and that formed the basis for English (and emergent American) jurisprudence. In *Commentaries*, William Blackstone articulates the rights of husband and wife:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme-covert*; and is said to be *covert-baron*, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her *baron*, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*. Upon this principle, of an union of person in husband and wife, depend almost all of the legal rights, duties, and disabilities, that either of them acquire by the marriage. (430)

Upon marriage the husband acquires not only legal rights over his wife's material body but ownership of her subjective existence; the laws of *coverture* erase not just the individual legal status but also the "very being" of the woman. Despite the explicit way the laws of *coverture* subjugate—and indeed enact an erasure of the legal rights and personal identity of—women, Blackstone reasons that the laws are in place as a way to safeguard women because "so great a favourite is the female sex of the laws of England" (433). He notes that "even the disabilities, which the wife lies under, are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit" (433).

Wollstonecraft squarely rejects Blackstone's model of protection and equates the marriage laws and customs of her time with violence and oppression. She explains that "[t]he Wrongs of Woman, like the wrongs of the oppressed part of mankind, may be deemed necessary by their oppressors: but surely there are a few, who will dare to advance before the improvement of the age" (59). Rather than bringing about progress, the marriage laws limit not just the rights of women but their sense of agency as well. Nancy Johnson notes that Wollstonecraft's novel presents the "paternalistic assumption" made by Blackstone as an insidious form of false benevolence that is "fatal to women" ("Women, Agency, and the Law" 282). Wollstonecraft, according to Johnson, exposes the protection of *coverture* as "a guise that covers the acquisition of property through marriage, the double standard of fidelity, the annihilation of legal identity, and the all-purpose diagnosis of madness to silence and sequester defiant women such as the protagonist" in *Maria* (282). Indeed, Wollstonecraft makes no disguise of her novel's

intended purpose. Wollstonecraft states that the main object in writing the novel was to “exhibit[] the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (59).

In *Maria*, it is through, as Johnson describes it, “the all-purpose diagnosis of madness” that Maria’s husband, Venables, imprisons her in an asylum in an attempt to gain control of her finances. Maria’s uncle had willed her child a fortune and had designated Maria guardian of this inheritance. Having knowledge of both Venables’s true character as a spendthrift, libertine, and violent man as well as the unjust laws of *coverture*, Maria’s uncle had taken every measure “to enable [Maria] to be mistress of his fortune, without putting any part of it in Mr Venables’ power” (132). By falsely, though legally, confining Maria to an insane asylum, Venables is able to gain access to this fortune. Speaking of the asylum in which Maria is brutally confined with legal impunity, Johnson notes that “the eery, decrepit prison of the madhouse could, in one of its many symbolic functions, refer to the institution of British law that ‘protects’ women through confinement and denial of rights” (*The English Jacobin Novel* 151). The madhouse also invokes Gothic imagery, although Wollstonecraft deviates from Gothic traditions by locating the source of danger and persecution in corporeal bodies as well as in the legal code. Ghislaine McDayter reads Maria’s body as “a metaphor for all oppression against women, her imprisonment enlarged to represent patriarchal society as a whole” (58).⁶

⁶ McDayter gives a fascinating interpretation of the use of space in eighteenth-century Gothic texts. She reads Gothic representations of imprisonment as largely pleasure-inducing for contemporary readers because they provided room for “fantasy and the

McDayter argues that “Wollstonecraft, no doubt wary of the addictive imagery surrounding the Gothic genre, chose a writing strategy designed specifically to eliminate the possibility of her book ‘feeding’ the same unhealthy addiction she sought to eradicate” (58). This “addiction,” according to McDayter, was the practice of female readers “savoring the broken bodies of their favorite heroines” (58). McDayter’s conclusion seems particularly apt given what Wollstonecraft says about the Gothic in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*: “These are gothic notions of beauty—the ivy is beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?” (8).

While *Maria* certainly reveals the biased marriage laws that literally regarded wives as chattel,⁷ the novel also implicates the ways social customs and traditions

fluctuation of personal boundaries that might also occur in these spaces” (55). Notably, she describes how Wollstonecraft’s texts deviate from the pleasurable consumption model because Maria herself is turned into a symbol of inescapable female oppression. While grounded in different reasons, McDayter’s reading of space as negative in *Maria*—if not in the majority of contemporary Gothic texts—is a productive analogue to my interpretation of the space of separation in Wollstonecraft’s novel. Further, speaking of the material practices of Gothic reading audiences, McDayter notes how readers would form a community of exchange via circulating libraries, an observation that has parallels to my reading of the connection between the ability to bridge schisms and form a communal subjectivity.

⁷ Under the laws of *coverture*, a woman was considered a material object of property; thus, a husband could enter a legal claim for property damage if his wife was abducted or beaten (Johnson, “Women, Agency, and the Law” 283). Maria laments the way in which

engender violence against women, for without human enforcement written laws, of course, have no material validity. The human intercourse at the heart of social customs and traditions is also at the heart of Wollstonecraft's vision of sensibility and the sublime in *Maria*. In the novel, it is through these modes that people come to acknowledge—and sometimes resist—violations of fundamental human dignity even when the person enacting the violation is in legal compliance with written laws.⁸ Noting the emergence of natural rights discourse during the 1790s, R. S. White explains that “literature was one powerful forge where the idea [of natural rights] was tested through the creative imagination and transferred to popular consciousness. Among the results were new and more egalitarian ways of thinking about society, far-reaching political reforms, and the birth of new forms of literature . . .” (1). I argue that *Maria* demonstrates this “new form” of literature in which aesthetic categories serve as gateways to socio-political arguments about natural rights.

the law makes dehumanized objects of women, noting that a wife is “as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass” (118).

⁸ This articulation of a kind of proto civil disobedience on the part of Maria resonates with the argument that Blackstone (certainly no friend of radical politics) gives in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* when he exclaims that ethics is synonymous with natural law, and that “no human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this; and such of them as are valid derive all their force, and all their authority, mediately or immediately, from this original [natural law]” (41). While Blackstone regards natural law as being “dictated by God himself” (41), I argue that Wollstonecraft locates the source of natural law in the heart-mind connection; namely, in the way in which fine feelings of sensibility allow for a sublime experience of a shared or common humanity.

In contrast to the critical narrative that Wollstonecraft held reason as the highest faculty with which to enact change, the rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime in *Maria* merges emotion and reason and asserts that resisting injustice is a matter for both the head *and* the heart. Syndy Conger describes Wollstonecraft's revised and radical use of sensibility in *Maria* by stating, "[a]s symbolic action, *Maria* is an especially significant step forward; for in it Wollstonecraft concretizes and conquers the prison-house of sensibility that earlier often holds her and her heroines in captivity," and that Wollstonecraft's rhetoric of sensibility in the novel inspires "a resistance movement among several women under the banner of liberty and justice" (178). Speaking of Wollstonecraft's use of the sublime in *Maria*, Daniella Mallinick argues that Wollstonecraft explicitly rejects Burke's version of the sublime as privileging the dehumanizing and incapacitating effects of fear; rather, Wollstonecraft focuses on the way the sublime has the potential "to reveal a complex vision of human capability—packaged in this novel as a new kind of heroism—that cannot be realized without the experience of a sublime that requires both feeling and rationality" (2). Mallinick articulates how Wollstonecraft revises an aesthetic category and presents the sublime "as an experience that can generate an awareness of important innate qualities" and the fundamental dignity of human beings (7).

Indeed, speaking about the deep injustices she suffered under the partial marriage laws of her country and the legally sanctioned tyranny of her husband, Maria draws a direct parallel between her husband's lack of affective compassion towards others and his disregard of fundamental human rights. Maria states that Venables "pretended to be an

advocate for liberty, with as little affection for the human race as for individuals, he thought of nothing but his own gratification” and thought nothing of violating the “laws . . . of humanity” (119). Similarly, the protagonist describes how when she first finds herself locked and isolated in the asylum, she attempts to connect with her only human contact, her attendant Jemima. Even though Maria recounts to Jemima the legally sanctioned injustices she suffered by the hand of her husband, it is not until Maria tells of the emotionally raw experience of losing her daughter that Jemima is moved to consider her own position as caretaker of Maria. Initially, Jemima is not affected by reason alone because her own heart has been sealed by profoundly inhumane treatment. However, while Maria “failed immediately to rouse a lively sense of injustice in the mind of her guard, because it had been sophisticated into misanthropy, she touched her heart” (64).

In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft rewrites sensibility so that access to one’s feelings and passions does not lead to overburdened, emotional dysfunction but to radical social engagement. Describing the relationship forged between Maria and Jemima in Wollstonecraft’s text, Claudia Johnson claims that it is “new in the history of the novel” (204). Johnson describes the relationship as announcing a turn towards an “affective community” built upon “female solidarity” that “suggests an alternative to the disastrousness of heterosexual relations” (204). Syndy Conger notes that *Maria* represents the “new fiction of sensibility” in which sensibility is “an active heroic virtue” (177). Making a direct link between social activism and sensibility, Conger writes that “in *Maria* Wollstonecraft presents a society moving toward transition” and that sensibility “instigates and fosters those changes” (177). Conger explains how

Wollstonecraft diminishes the potential for solipsism in the aesthetics of sensibility when Jemima and Maria are moved to remedy injustice not via rational analysis but by an emotional reaction. She notes that “their response moves very swiftly from passive sympathy to empathy, and from there to hard-won mutual respect and mutual support in their campaign to eradicate injustice in their world, each for the other’s sake” (162). Far from being aesthetic ideals, sensibility and the sublime in *Maria* (like in Williams’ *Letters Written in France*) are modes of social intercourse.

Even before Maria details the abuse she suffered pursuant to marriage laws, Jemima’s tale draws an explicit connection between systemic gender and class injustice and alienation from human emotion. Jemima eventually comes to embody a radical and empowered subjectivity that is defined by existence beyond enacted laws. However, her isolation from human exchange at the hands of legal and societal tyranny initially leads her to act as an outlaw without any sense of human value or notion of viable self. Jemima is an “outlaw” in two senses of the word. She is an “outlaw” in the more common usage of the term in that she breaks laws. However, she is also an “outlaw” in that she is an “outlier”: she exists in the world in a distant, nonrelational fashion, in an isolated state that is not governed by any universal, communal, or other structural mandates. Maria herself uses the term in the latter sense when she describes the “compassion I feel for many amiable women, the *out-laws* of the world” (116; emphasis in the original). Indeed, Maria describes the state of women to be so severely cast out from the positive, binding, formal structures of a community that they are rendered countryless: “[H]e can rob her with impunity, even to waste publically on a courtesan;

and the laws of her country—if women have a country—afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor . . .” (118). In a bitter paradox, these “outlaw” women are outside of the legal protections of the law despite being severely bounded by their restrictive authority.

Jemima states that during this time of extreme oppression, she was “the refuse of society” (84) and “a ghost among the living” (87). She begins her tale by explaining, in merely one sentence, the devastating toll gender and class inequality has on not just the financial security of women but also on their psychological and moral soundness: “My father . . . seduced my mother, a pretty girl, with whom he lived fellow-servant; and she no sooner perceived the natural, the dreaded consequence, than the terrible conviction flashed on her – that she was ruined” (79-80).⁹ Jemima explains her mother, who was more afraid of being shamed than poor, tried to convince her lover to marry her but to no avail. While Jemima’s father remained employed, her mother was forced out of her employment and died nine days after giving birth to Jemima. A wet nurse was hired for Jemima, but because “[p]overty, and the habit of seeing children die off her hands” (80) had hardened her heart, she felt no sympathy toward the infant; thus, Jemima had never learned to feel sympathy.

⁹ Adam Komisaruk has noted that the way Jemima describes her father parallels the metaphors “of bourgeois resistance to the *ancien régime*” (55). Identifying the tyranny of an emotionally sealed person with the brutality of a political establishment is similar to Helen Maria Williams’s construction of the Baron du Fossé as an embodiment of the anti-egalitarian ideology of pre-Revolutionary France.

Jemima traces her unethical and illegal behavior and feelings of hate back to her initial isolation from sympathy and human exchange. Using discourse that merges legal, phenomenological, and emotional categories, Jemima notes that her alienation from affection causes her to lie and steal, actions that, in turn, lead to more extreme abuse and her being “treated like a creature of another species.” Jemima recounts: “To save myself from these unmerciful corrections [of physical beatings], I resorted to falsehood, and the untruths which I sturdily maintained, were brought in judgment against me, to support my tyrant’s inhuman charge of my natural propensity to vice” (81). The emotional and physical brutality Jemima suffers does not deter her from deviating from the law as a means to secure minimal survival for herself even as it causes her to characterize herself in non-human, legal terms. Jemima explains how she was dragged through “the very kennels of society; I was a slave, a bastard, a common property” (85). Jemima’s identity is not founded on human emotion and interaction, on notions of relational relevance between her and a wider community; rather, she perceives herself to be formed by specific, closed laws delineating ownership and legal accountability.

The affective response that Jemima’s narrative stimulates in Maria not only provides Jemima with emotional support, but also integrates her back into the human, communal realm and, eventually, into an “emancipatory fellowship” (Johnson, C. 205) with Maria. When Maria reaches out to Jemima by taking her hand at the end of the tale, Jemima is “more overcome with kindness than she ever had been by cruelty” (91) and agrees to help Maria escape from her unjust—though perfectly legal—confinement in the asylum. Conger explains that Jemima’s “metamorphosis from being a craven servant as

brutal as her many brutal masters to being Maria's fiercely loyal and loving friend highlights Wollstonecraft's trust that sensibility can be woman's last, most saving, grace, a capacity that can not only solace her in, but also extricate her from, any psychological oppression perpetuated by misogyny" (166). Once Jemima is no longer "shut out from all intercourse of humanity" (85), she comes to see herself not merely as human, but as a necessary member of the community that will resist injustice.

In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft transforms sensibility by merging the rhetoric of this aesthetic category with that of natural rights jurisprudence. Speaking of the relationship that is forged between Maria and Jemima, Syndy Conger has noted that by "changing the declamation of sentimental self-absorption into the rhetoric of radical social protest" (161), Wollstonecraft makes the ability to deliver justice reliant on the ability to engage in meaningful emotional exchange as well as rational judgments about when one should follow or deviate from the law. Nancy Johnson has described the intersection of human exchange and aesthetics in the novel as "an ethic of care, an awareness of the importance of relationships The concern that each of the characters in the asylum expresses for each other becomes a critical form of agency that sustains and empowers them" ("Women, Agency, and the Law" 285). Conger's reading of female agency vis-à-vis the transpersonal, emotional exchange of sensibility in *Maria* goes further than Johnson's reading, and characterizes the novel as "a narrative of emancipation," in which Maria and Jemima "undergo a metamorphosis from victims to victors" who "transform . . . mutual sympathy into a redemptive sisterhood so committed that it occasionally leads to civil disobedience" (161). Indeed, I argue that by folding sensibility into identity formation

itself, Wollstonecraft announces a new model for a subjectivity based on one's access to emotion and the process of human exchange.

Similarly, the sublime in *Maria* is directly related to the notion of social justice and cannot be experienced in isolation. Daniella Mallinick asserts that in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft does not merely invoke the sublime for aesthetic purposes; rather, she progressively reconstitutes the requirements for—and reimagines the consequences of—the sublime experience. Mallinick argues that Wollstonecraft “strives to present a decidedly practical, historically constituted—and historically conscious—version of what is often viewed as an apolitical aesthetic idea” (2), and that Wollstonecraft’s use of the sublime is central to her efforts to produce a more inclusive sense of agency and social equality for women (1). As R. S. White has noted, in *Maria* Wollstonecraft demonstrates an “adherence to the principles of classical natural law: a positive law which offends against conscience and shared moral obligations, is no law at all. And the repeated denials of liberty and full human status are represented as breaches of specific natural rights that can reduce women to either ‘monsters’ or of less than human intellect” (115-16). Maria’s resolve to act with regard to a wider sense of justice that upholds the natural rights of all people, to act according to “a sentiment of justice” (Dubber 824), announces a new model of the connection between aesthetics, agency, and justice.

Bolstering these connections, the material, aesthetic form of *Maria* underscores some of the thematic, egalitarian imperatives of the text. Literally a communal structure, the novel comprises a number of discrete parts that come together as the larger narrative whole. In the Author’s Preface, in which Wollstonecraft speaks directly to her readers to

announce her “main object” in writing the novel: “the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (59). The published fiction itself contains an author’s Preface and is narrated by four speakers. Although the third-person speaker begins and interjects numerous times throughout the story, the details of the novel are told by three first-person speakers: Darnford, a patient at the asylum and Maria’s eventual lover, who recalls his tale verbally to Maria; Jemima, who also depicts her account verbally to Maria and Darnford; and Maria, whose tale is written in the form of a letter to her young daughter. Left unfinished at her death, *Maria* also contains a Preface written by Wollstonecraft’s husband, William Godwin, and a conclusion of “two detached sentences, and some scattered heads” pasted together by the Editor, also Godwin. In addition to the way the form of the novel emphasizes how individual agency is both distinct from and intimately integrated into communal structure, the differences in class, gender, and race of the narrators similarly affirm the radical arguments of the text.

Not only does Wollstonecraft complicate the traditionally strict dichotomy between reason and feeling to integrate natural rights and aesthetic categories, but in so doing her aesthetics necessarily blurs the distinction between private and public. Wollstonecraft employs juridical discourse and the rhetoric of sensibility and the sublime to merge traditionally private, aesthetic categories (sensibility and the sublime) and traditionally public, social categories (law and subject position). Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd’s study of Wollstonecraft’s texts sees Wollstonecraft, most notably in *Maria*, dissolving the line separating “[t]he public and private, the worldly and domestic,

objective data and subjective response” (105). Similarly, Conger explains that in writing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft “seems to believe that in the area of domestic reform, private actions may be as effective in bringing about change as shifts in public policy”; thus, Conger argues, Wollstonecraft maintained that women should not move away from employing aesthetic categories like sensibility, but rather reimagine them as “tools of social change” that have the ability to “emancipate women” (165).

Sublime sensibility functions in *Maria* as a progressive, interactive mode through which individuals can begin to resist “the partial laws and customs of society.” Thus, if one does not possess fine sensibility, he or she will not attain the sublime experience of recognizing violations of fundamental human rights and acknowledging his or her agency to resist such injustice. Noting that her tyrannical husband wrongfully confined Maria to the “infernal solitude” of an asylum, the narrator explains the futile attempt Maria makes to articulate the horribly unjust nature of her capture: “To the master of this most horrid of prisons, she had, soon after her entrance, raved of injustice, in accents that would have justified his treatment, had not a malignant smile, when she appealed to his judgment, with a dreadful conviction stifled her remonstrating complaints” (62). Maria’s husband, the reader soon learns, has used the partiality of the law to enact grave violence against his wife for the purpose of reaching her fortune, and the male warden acts in concert with the legal wishes of Maria’s husband. That the warden will not be moved to sympathize with the legally marginalized—and thus financially vulnerable—Maria demonstrates what Adam Smith claims is the greatest cause of the corruption of one’s moral sentiments: “the disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful,

and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition” (72). At birth, Maria’s sex determined her low and defenseless position (“Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (64)), which was sustained through the inequality of the law. As the novel opens, we see the material enactment of the existential juridical condition of women: Maria is imprisoned without cause but with complete legal impunity. She is without a defense based in written law, and the warden’s corrupt moral sentiment leaves her without a defense based in the justice that stems from natural law.

The eponymous character in *Maria* argues passionately for a legal system that is flexible enough to provide equitable relief when strict adherence to written laws conflicts with principles of natural law. She characterizes the way in which the laws of *coverture* scandalize, infantilize, and enslave women by “fix[ing] the national belief, that the husband should always be wiser and more virtuous than his wife, in order to entitle him, with a show of justice, to keep this idiot, or perpetual minor, for ever in bondage” (118). Maria maintains that owing to the extreme inequality and injustice of marriage laws, people should look outside of the law to make determinations about justice. Just as Smith’s impartial spectator operates as a third element, as a quasi-present locale for evaluating moral sentiment, between one’s self and another, Wollstonecraft establishes sublime sensibility as a third element, as a mode for recognizing a more radical agency that is based on juridical, humanitarian, and communal concerns. In *Maria*, sensibility allows for a transformative moment of perception about the ways in which written laws conflict with natural law mandates. In this sublime moment, one acts according to one’s

“own sense of justice” and constructs an empowered agency rooted in communal subjectivity.

“My own sense of justice”

The first suggestion that Maria follow her own sense of morals and preserve her natural rights as a *human* (even in spite of being a *wife*) comes, perhaps paradoxically, from the male character Darnford.¹⁰ Darnford writes to Maria about

‘the absurdity of the laws respecting matrimony, which, till divorces could be more easily obtained, was,’ he declared, ‘the most insufferable bondage. Ties of this nature could not bind minds governed by superior principles; and such beings were privileged to act above the dictates of laws they had no voice in framing, if they had sufficient strength of mind to endure the natural consequence. In her case, to talk of duty, was a farce, excepting what was due to herself.’ (137)

¹⁰ Darnford is a complex character. On one hand, he may be read as embodying the right balance of feeling and reason that Wollstonecraft advocates for in the novel, and he is certainly no friend of the contemporary binding marriage laws, restrictive social customs, and partial gender roles. Indeed, he is reminiscent of Mary’s beloved yet infirm Henry, whose “rational religious sentiments received warmth from his sensibility” (24). As G. J. Barker-Benfield has acknowledged, Wollstonecraft “attempted to maintain [a distinction] between sensibility combined with reason, and the entirely ungoverned and emotional kind characterizing the fashionable, conventional rearing of females” (281). Yet in some of the fragments of notes for the continuation of the novel, Wollstonecraft characterizes Darnford as a reckless libertine who uses Maria for financial gain and sexual satisfaction. While an unfaithful Darnford abandons Maria and goes abroad, a pregnant and deserted Maria suffers a miscarriage and commits suicide.

The “superior principles” about which Darnford writes are principles according to natural rights. Such rights are participatory rather than exclusionary: while most people had “no voice in framing” the marriage laws written by a select group of males, everyone can establish their own sense of justice according to laws of fundamental rights. Of course, failure to comply with written mandates will come at a cost and bear “natural consequence[s].” Darnford is quite explicitly advocating that Maria accept whatever legal sanctions or cultural repercussions may follow if she act in accordance with natural law.

The clarity with which Maria does come to regard herself as free from the mental binds of marriage laws is sharply contrasted with her feelings at the opening of the novel. The laws have not been changed, and yet rather than regarding herself as a “slave” born into a “vast prison” because of her sex, she believes herself to be free once she learns that her husband intended to prostitute her to pay his debts. “When the mind has, from reflection, a certain kind of elevation . . . we see what we wish, and make a world of our own” (138). Maria’s ability to make a world of her own stems from sublime sensibility, and is grounded in her conviction that where the law clashes with equitable justice, one must be governed by one’s own mind and not by external law. Maria explains her reasoning with words mirroring Darnford’s when she states: “I wish my country to approve of my conduct; but, if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of justice, and declare that I will not live with the individual, who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man” (144).

Maria's "own sense of justice"—a sense that is reached through sublime sensibility—is at the heart of her literal and figurative emancipation from the detestable state of *coverture*. The last finished chapter of the novel describes Maria's voluntary participation in the case instituted against Darnford by Venables for adultery, or, as it was known at the time, "criminal conversation." Adam Komisaruk notes that a cause of action for criminal conversation was founded on what he characterizes as the dominant interest of the middle class: property (35). Since a woman entered *coverture* and became the legal property of her husband when she entered a legal contract for marriage, if a man seduced another man's wife the value of the husband's property could be considered diminished; thus, the husband would have a cause of action to recover his monetary losses based on the diminution of value of his wife. Traditionally, in criminal conversation cases neither the plaintiff (the husband) nor the defendant (the purported lover) would testify; rather, testimony would be given by witnesses for both sides, such as family members, friends, and servants who were privy to the intimate details of domestic life (Komisaruk 37). The procedure for Darnford's trial deviates sharply from the usual proceedings, most notably because Maria herself enters a long affidavit admitting her role in the affair, the reasons for it, and her revolutionary plea for jury nullification of the laws of criminal conversation based on higher principles of natural rights and human dignity.

Maria's insistence on entering her voice in the legal proceedings responds to Darnford's critique of the injustice of a judicial system that requires women to abide by "the dictates of laws they had no voice in framing" (137). Not only does Maria

acknowledge the truth of the affair, but she also refuses to characterize herself as having been passively seduced; rather, she cites her active participation and full consent regarding the relationship with Darnford. In an act that embodies Maria's new-found heroism to challenge "the partial laws and customs of society" that engender "the misery and oppression" of women, Maria claims to exceed the power of the court to define and enforce "the rigid laws which enslave women" and exclaims herself legal interpreter and judge of her conduct. Maria does not have access to the benefits of the written law; however, in what is a revolutionary speech act, she uses her voice to self-annul the legal validity of her marriage to Venables. Maria exclaims: "I consider all obligation as made void by his conduct; and hold, that schisms which proceeded from want of principles, can never be healed" (143).

"Schisms which proceed from want of principles" are intimately tied to Wollstonecraft's larger message about how sublime sensibility allows a person to recognize the communal nature of natural rights. In *Maria*, it is the emotional but also the physical space of separation between two persons that perpetuates injustice. The novel is a cautionary tale about what can happen when one lacks the sensibility to reach sublime moments of realization about, and resistance to, fundamental injustice, when one fails to enter into Wollstonecraft's "aesthetics of solidarity" (Bahar 8). G. J. Barker-Benfield has stated that for Wollstonecraft, it was sensibility that "placed its possessor in touch with the sublime," and that sensibility allowed for sympathetic communion with "the poor and oppressed among human kind . . ." (281). Daniella Mallinick similarly locates a connection between Wollstonecraft's sublime and higher notions of

fundamental justice. Mallinck writes that “*Maria* proposes that women have been wronged by being unjustly sentenced to an intolerable existence. And the experience of the sublime, by affirming women’s sense of humanity, reason, and godliness, reinforces this sense of injustice for them and for readers” (19).¹¹ Indeed, while the cause of action at issue in the courtroom scene dictates that some kinds of human exchange are a violation of the partial, contemporary codified laws—it is “criminal” to “converse” with (read: “seduce”) a man’s wife—sublime sensibility dictates that it is a crime against impartial, atemporal natural law to remain unresponsive when there is a schism between what is legal and what is just. Speaking of the need for active participation by all members of a community to lessen the gap between the rich and the poor, Darnford exclaims that

’till the rich will give more than a part of their wealth, till they will give time and attention to the wants of the distressed, never let them boast of charity. Let them open their hearts, and not their purses, and employ their minds in the service, if they are really actuated by humanity; or charitable institutions will always be the prey of the lowest order of knaves. (91)¹²

¹¹ Discussing the “feminine community” of *Maria*, *Jemima*, and *Maria*’s young daughter that is established at the end of the novel, Mallinck states that “[t]he image of a separate community of women encourages female—and male—readers who grasp ‘the wrongs of woman’ to acknowledge that women deserve respect and to create a society whose laws and employment possibilities reflect the understanding that both men and women possess a God-given sense of purposiveness” (19).

¹² Darnford echoes the idea behind the early articulations of activist sensibility that Wollstonecraft set forth in *Mary* (“goodness went about *doing* good” (25)) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (“charity is not a condescending distribution of alms,

Darnford, like Maria, argues for a sublime sensibility that incorporates both the heart and the mind to ameliorate communal injustice.

Maria flatly refuses to adhere to the notion expressed by her landlady, whose husband's physical and verbal violence had "grizzled her into patience," that "when a women was once married, she must bear every thing" (126). Maria voluntarily admits to the court that once she self-annulled her marriage contract to Venables, she did not feel morally constrained to live a celibate life. She also explains that she did not feel compelled to cease a relationship with Darnford based on the punishment that could ensue from legal mandates written by humans. Her affidavit states:

I voluntarily gave myself [to Darnford], never considering myself as any more bound to transgress the laws of moral purity, because the will of my husband might be pleaded in my excuse, than to transgress those laws to which the policy of artificial society has annexed positive punishments. — While no command of a husband can prevent a women from suffering for certain crimes, she must be allowed to consult her conscience, and regulate her conduct, in some degree, by her own sense of right. *The respect I owe to myself*, demanded my strict adherence to my determination of never viewing Mr Venables in the light of a husband, nor could it forbid me from encouraging another. (144; emphasis added)

Maria argues with fortitude and certainty that she is owed respect as an individual human being in spite of the fact that she is a legally sanctioned wife, who, thus, exists under the legal condition of *coverture*. Contesting the idea that, pursuant to *coverture*, her very existence—as well as her legal rights—are virtually annulled, Maria attempts to produce

but an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity" (9)).

a fissure in the rigidity of the law to produce a more humane result that is based in notions of natural rights and communal justice.

Some critics have read Maria's favoring principles of natural rights over the written laws and cultural mandates of *coverture* as an example of the heroine operating *outside* of the law. For example, Nancy Johnson describes Maria as being a self-imposed exile from the law, and argues that "Maria's final appeal in her courtroom treatise is to step outside the law" (*The English Jacobin Novel* 149). Similarly, Kathryn Temple writes that the effect of Maria's actions is ultimately an expulsion from juridical culture (71). However, I counter these readings and argue that the distinction between Maria acting outside of the law and acting within the law to challenge it and advocate for a further rupture of its legal validity is not merely a semantic distinction. It is through the law and her impassioned speech for jury nullification to protect natural rights of all community members that she transitions from a state of *coverture* to *recovering* her identity in, if not by, a court of law. While the "radically flawed legal system of the eighteenth century that [Wollstonecraft] conjures up cannot restore benefits hitherto denied Maria and Jemima" (Ferguson and Todd 116), the courtroom provides a forum in which Maria can articulate a more radical, communal agency.

In asking the jury to ignore whether the facts of the case support the judgment at law for criminal conversation, Maria makes a clear distinction between what is legally correct and what is morally just. The legal question can be determined based on applying the facts of each individual case; for the moral judgment, one must consider jurisprudential concerns about when the written law enacts an injustice that violates

commonly shared beliefs about natural law and equitable justice. Arguing for jury nullification, Maria states:

I claim then a divorce, and the liberty of enjoying, free from molestation, the fortune left to me by a relation, who was well aware of the character of the man with whom I had to contend. – I appeal to the justice and humanity of the jury – a body of men, whose private judgment must be allowed to modify laws, that must be unjust, because definite rules can never apply to indefinite circumstances – and I deprecate punishment upon the man of my choice, freeing him, as I solemnly do, from the charge of seduction. (144)

Maria's appeal to "the justice and humanity of the jury" speaks to an identity theory that regards what is atemporal, fundamental, and communal in higher regard than what is historically sanctioned, prescribed, and individually penalizing. Even though the jury is a "body of men," Maria's argument neutralizes this gender distinction and speaks to a notion of self made vital through human exchange and an awareness—felt in the heart and understood in the head—about inalienable, nongendered, *human* rights. Gary Kelly reads this appeal as "a kind of radical individualism . . . against any collective or state pre-emption of individual freedom of justice" (*Revolutionary Feminism* 221).¹³ I refute

¹³ In his subsequent work, *Women, Writing, and Revolution*, Kelly acknowledges that the ways in which eighteenth-century women writers represented the intersection of individualism, aesthetic categories, and communal emphases produced varying and competing models. He writes that sensibility "guaranteed social relations, co-operation, and cohesion against excesses of individualism" (7-8). Sensibility also "was associated with excessive or sublime selfhood of the imagination and 'genius' . . ." (8). Finally, sensibility "could lead to social transgression, crime, or 'madness', as social categories designed for the willfully or unwillingly extra-social" (8). In "Sublime Heroism and *The Wrongs of Woman*," Daniella Mallinck counters that "Wollstonecraft's sublime is not

Kelly's stance and argue that while Maria's appeal certainly asks for individual consideration, her appeal more critically asks for acknowledgement of and action regarding the fundamental liberties at the heart of human community. Maria's appeal rests upon the belief that the all-male jury should form a community of resistance to protest unjust laws by engaging in jury nullification, and that women should unite to engage in a kind of proto-civil disobedience if their male counterparts fail to uphold natural law mandates. As we will see in the next chapter, Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, similarly locates a space for justice beyond the written law and within an outlaw community whose "comrades" abide by the clear distinction between justice and the law.

Maria was left unfinished at the time of Wollstonecraft's death, and so we cannot know with certainty how the novel "ends." However, whether striking coincidence or planned strategy, the final paragraph of the last full chapter of the novel circles the reader back to one of the texts in which Wollstonecraft begins her critique of aesthetics, partial customs, and the oppressive rule of law, her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. The judge who presides over Venables's case against Darnford sounds Burkean, and eschews the idea of "French principles in public or private life" (145). The judge "had always determined to oppose all innovation, and the new-fangled notions which incroached on the good old rules of conduct" (145). Ignoring the vital argument that Maria makes that

solely individualistic; while individual strength of mind is valuable, collective, principled action is the only way to create a safe space in which human beings, regardless of gender or rank, can exercise their strengths of mind" (19).

the “sanctity of marriage” was not only a fiction but state-sanctioned violence against the female sex, the judge concludes his speech—and the novel—by stating that although legal restrictions on obtaining a divorce “might bear a little hard on a few, very few individuals, it was evidently for the good of the whole” (145). Ironically, the statement that such restrictions are for the good of the whole cuts directly against what Maria comes to understand through sublime sensibility: that a violation of one person’s natural rights enacts inequitable injustice against the communal whole.

CHAPTER IV

“THE SUBLIME OF TRUE VIRTUE AND THE PATHOS OF TRUE SYMPATHY”:

NARRATIVE (IN)JUSTICE IN WILLIAM GODWIN’S *CALEB WILLIAMS*

If you must suffer, do not, I conjure you, suffer without making use of this opportunity of telling a tale upon which the happiness of nations depends. ... Never forget that juries are men, and that men are made of penetrable stuff.

— William Godwin, Letter to Joseph Gerrald

[I]t was proposed, in the invention of [*Caleb Williams*], to comprehend, as far as the progressive nature of a single story would allow, a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man.

— William Godwin, Preface to *Caleb Williams*

Beyond political justice

What constitutes justice beyond the political, beyond parliamentary enactments and juridical pronouncements? This question is at the center of William Godwin’s *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). In Godwin’s epistolary novel, Caleb Williams is legally confined and tormented under the written law for a crime he did not commit but for which he was erroneously found guilty. Similar to Williams’s characterization of the law in *Letters Written in France* and Wollstonecraft’s depiction of the law in *Maria*, in *Caleb Williams* the law is presented as profoundly corrupt and deeply inhumane. However, in *Letters Written in France* Williams focuses primarily on primogeniture and the violence of its attendant legal mandates; in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft also criticizes a specific area of juridical and social injustice, namely the

abject gender discrimination arising from the “partial laws and customs of society.”

Godwin, on the other hand, makes an even more radical argument because of the breadth of its condemnation. In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin suggests that the entire system of written law is inadequate and that justice can only be found beyond the law, beyond legal justice. Although the implications of Godwin’s argument are farther reaching than those of Williams and Wollstonecraft, he similarly articulates his argument by rewriting the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime. As do the other writers in this dissertation, Godwin reconstructs sensibility and the sublime so that the aesthetic categories become gateways to understanding and urging egalitarian justice and to formulating notions of identity construction in which “individuals” are presented as multiple and communal.

In *Caleb Williams*, the relation between communal subjectivity and justice is embodied most keenly in the character of Mr Raymond, who is the only one in the novel exemplifying justice beyond the law, what Godwin calls “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy” in *Political Justice* (395). In my reading of Godwin’s use of sensibility and the sublime, “the pathos of true sympathy” is what one must possess to recognize the inhumane nature of the written law, and the most virtuous act, the “sublime of true virtue,” in the novel occurs when one acts based on the principles of hospitality to bring about communal, egalitarian justice. Although Mr Raymond is an important character, his role in the novel has received almost no scholarly attention. This chapter addresses this gap in scholarship and argues that Mr Raymond is central to the novel’s articulation of justice because he personifies a communal space of equality that is

achieved through “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.”

Extending the ethical theory of hospitality further than Helen Maria Williams does, Godwin describes Mr Raymond as enacting justice through the hospitality—that is, the justice outside of the law—he offers to the outlaw Caleb. In addition, just as Mary Wollstonecraft will argue for the importance of jury nullification in *Maria*, in *Caleb Williams* Godwin both explicitly reveals the inequity in the application of written laws and implicitly uses the rhetoric of sensibility to argue that making rational decisions about justice starts with one’s heart and an acknowledgement of the fellow-feeling of communal ties that construct an individual.

More than Williams and Wollstonecraft, Godwin suggests in *Caleb Williams* essential parallels between textual construction, justice, and subjectivity. In *Caleb Williams*, the narrator is clear that both justice *and* injustice are achieved through narrative acts. The narrator, Caleb, states at the outset of the novel that he has given up hope of finding current justice pursuant to the written law—the binary, juridically-imposed *narrative* of legal “guilt” versus “innocence”—because the law has enacted such grave injustice. Thus, Caleb endeavors to *narrate* his own justice in the form of his tale which may be believed by future generations. Caleb’s hope for eventual justice is that in the future the communal opinion surrounding his “adventures” will find him innocent, that the comingled, master narrative will rewrite his name with justice based on “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.” In the novel, not only is justice found beyond the written law, but narrative acts are the means by which individuals write themselves into—and out of—existence. To more sharply explicate my argument about

communal, narrative construction of an individual—and the (in)justice that this process involves—I will examine this strain of my argument vis-à-vis Louis Althusser’s theory of identity formation. In addition to the tale—the “adventures” of Caleb Williams—driving the novel itself, the structure of the novel parallels the notion of an individual voice as multiple construction, with the novel an amalgam of several different voices that come together into Caleb’s single tale. Arguing that the possibility of justice in *Caleb Williams* is grounded in narrative rather than political acts, I offer an alternative critical approach to the mainstream scholarship about this text.

Despite the rich and complex arguments the novel makes in its own right about the possibility of justice, the majority of scholarship on *Caleb Williams* considers the novel vis-à-vis Godwinian political theory as espoused in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (1793).¹ In *Political Justice*, Godwin advocates for a code of law—or, a code of moral conduct—that is determined by an individual rather than by the parliamentary enactments of a political government. This is not to say, however, that Godwin’s *Political Justice* makes individual interest the sole consideration of moral conduct; quite the opposite, it is an individual’s reason and empathetic virtue—his cognizance that he is a relational being, that he is always already a

¹ R. S. White notes that “[a]lmost all critics, in fact, read the novel as a fictional representation of some strand in *Political Justice*” (102), and argues that *Caleb Williams* exemplifies Godwin’s philosophy of governance according to natural rights as set forth in *Political Justice*. Similarly, Mark Philp posits that *Caleb Williams* repeats the main ideas and mandates of Godwin’s treatise (109), and Marilyn Butler notes the “close correlation in Godwin’s mind between *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*” (253).

communal entity—that renders moral and just conduct. In *Political Justice*, Godwin describes both an “individual” and justice as reciprocal: “Justice is a rule of conduct originating in the connection of one percipient being with another” (169), and as a communal entity “I am bound to employ my talents, my understanding, my strength and my time, for the production of the greatest quantity of general good. Such are the declarations of justice, so great the extent of my duty” (175).

Another popular critical line of thought examines the novel for its rich psychological readings.² More recently, scholars have taken note of the role sensibility plays in the text, with most scholars arguing that *Caleb Williams* ultimately hands down an indictment of this aesthetic category.³ Despite this growing trend and, I argue, the

² Isabelle Bour argues that the psychological component of *Caleb Williams* is central to the novel and that in the novel “social history is seen as indivisible from psychological interaction between individuals” (814). Folding the sublime into her reading of the psychological dimension of *Caleb Williams*, Emily R. Anderson states that the novel invokes the “psychological sublime” rather than the more-common “supernatural sublime” (104).

³ Noting that Godwin depicts sympathy (and, specifically, the “magnetical sympathy” Caleb feels for Falkland) in *Caleb Williams* as equally injurious to individuals as codes of aristocratic chivalry, John Bender concludes that “[a] more scathing depiction of the sympathetic construction of character would be hard to imagine” (121). Similarly, Isabelle Bour states that Caleb and Falkland “exemplify the failure of sympathy” (823). Other scholars, however, have rejected sensibility’s importance in the novel and have argued that sensibility does not play a significant role in the novel. See, for example, R. S. White’s unequivocal claim that “[n]othing could be further removed from the sentimental novel than William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*” (101).

undeniably large space sensibility occupies in the novel, only Monika Fludernik has placed sensibility squarely at the center of her discussion to argue that the novel imagines the progressive, egalitarian aspects of sensibility.⁴ In “Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy in *Caleb Williams*,” Fludernik argues that Godwin enacts a transformation of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* so that it is through “reciprocal sympathy” that one finds not only justice and equality but “the very essence of our humanity” (29). Fludernik also deviates from the main critical path in her investigation of how the sublime operates in *Caleb Williams*. In “William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*: The Tarnishing of the Sublime,” she argues that Godwin’s novel demonstrates the possibility for “the sublime as an ideal of benevolence and unqualified affection for others” that “cancels out the aesthetics and politics of terror” (886). Another more recent critical trend, and one that is also directly related to this chapter, considers the intersection of narrative form, constructions of ethical justice, and identity construction. Tilottama Rajan finds affinities between Godwin’s novels and Derridean thought, noting that Godwin’s fiction underscores the gap between politics and justice,⁵ and Miriam Wallace and Nicholas Williams have both

⁴ Fludernik also acknowledges the negative, contagious aspects of sympathy in the novel, commenting that sympathy “besides elevating humanity to a status of semi-divine fellowship, also carries with it the dangers of infection and corruption, of illegitimate attraction and fatal obsession” (“Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy in *Caleb Williams*” 2).

⁵ While no critic, to my knowledge, has argued for the relevance of theories of justice set forth by Levinas and Derrida for reading *Caleb Williams*, Sue Chaplin has argued that in *Political Justice*, Godwin attempts “to place justice *beyond* the law and this *does* begin to resemble a poststructuralist, Derridean conceptualisation of justice” (119).

written about the ways in which the subjectivity in *Caleb Williams* hinges on the juridical and ideological implications of a “subject” in the novel.

Communal construction: text, subject, community

Similar to the narrative structure of Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, *Caleb Williams* is an amalgam of several different voices that come together into a single tale. However, *Maria* always retains a single, omniscient narrator even when the narrating voice is that of Maria, Jemima, or Darnford because, at these moments, a character is “narrating” via a letter that is implicitly read by the narrator. For example, in a scene in which Darnford begins to speak to Maria, the narrator states:

‘I shall weary you,’ continued he, ‘by my egotism; and did not powerful emotions draw me to you,’ — his eyes glistened as he spoke, and a trembling seemed to run through his manly frame — ‘I would not waste these precious moments in talking of myself.’ (74)

This passage epitomizes the way Wollstonecraft materially merges the identities of the original orator (i.e., Darnford) with that of the narrator. Wollstonecraft’s technique allows the reader to consider how narrative form can mirror larger, theoretical questions about what an “individual” is, and yet the realization of a distanced, unitary narrator is always imposed into the communal narration. In contrast, Godwin uses a technique of comingled voices in a much more radical way so that there is no intermediary, “single” narrator; indeed, not only in formal design but also in narrative content, *Caleb Williams* suggests that there are ultimately no unitary individuals. In Wollstonecraft’s later *Maria*, the communal subject will serve as a positive structure embodying the possibility for

social justice; in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, however, the communal subject is more tenuous, sometimes revealing the darker side of communitarianism: tyrannical appropriation of the individual.

Caleb's practice of comingling his narrating voice with the original utterances of other characters demonstrates the fine line between empowered communitarianism and unethical appropriation. The narrative of *Caleb Williams* is constructed from opening ("My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity") to closing ("I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character") pages with Caleb acting as the first-person narrator. Calling his tale a "memoir," Caleb addresses the reader directly throughout the novel and states that he is compelled to write the text out of "a desire to divert my mind from the deplorableness of my situation, and a faint idea that posterity may by their means be induced to render me a justice which my contemporaries refuse" (5). However, Caleb's story is *not* his own, even if he takes ownership of it for the duration of the novel. For example, Caleb explicitly exclaims that he will appropriate the narrative of his friend, Collins, regarding their "patron" Falkland and make it his own, thereby exercising tyrannical control over the narrative about Falkland's tyranny over Caleb. Caleb states: "To avoid confusion in my narrative, I shall drop the person of Collins, and assume to be myself the historian of our patron." Caleb even goes so far as to quell the reader's concern that he could not possibly give such a history because he did not bear witness to the events first hand by intimating that his psychological connection with Falkland is so extreme that Caleb's physical body has been subsumed into that of Falkland:

To the reader it may appear at first sight as if this detail of the preceding life of Mr Falkland were foreign to my history. Alas! I know from bitter experience that it is otherwise. My heart bleeds at the recollection of his misfortunes, as if they were my own. How can it fail to do so? To his story the whole fortune of my life was linked; because he was miserable, my happiness, my name, and my existence have been irretrievably blasted. (12)

In the preceding quotation, Caleb expresses a state of being in which he is oddly separate from yet deeply integrated with Falkland. The harbingers of identity (“name,” “existence”) have been “blasted,” and in their stead is Falkland’s story, which Caleb appropriates both in practice (“I shall drop the person of Collins, and assume to be myself the historian of our patron”) and in content (“To his story the whole fortune of my life was linked”).

My argument is not centered on the purely psychological doubling of the characters, but rather how the narrative structure itself articulates that an individual is always already a communal structure. Godwin’s text rejects the possibility of reading characters as self-actuated, independent individuals; rather, Godwin “holds up for analysis the entire mechanism of subjectivity, if not, at this point, explicitly rejecting it” (Williams 489). Not surprisingly given its topical context of prison, court systems, prosecution, persecution, defense, suspicion, and written and unwritten law, one may read the process of actualization in *Caleb Williams* as being inexorably tied to the judgment of others, and, namely, legally superior and supervisory others. Indeed, Miriam L. Wallace has noted that “the individual subject is ideologically and juridically formed” in *Caleb*

Williams (45).⁶ Wallace reads Caleb as becoming subjectively merged with Falkland because of Caleb's "interpellation of values learned from Falkland and from society's admiration for Falkland" (49). This merging is activated in the formal text as well, namely at the novel's climax when Caleb writes no longer "with the idea of vindicating *my* character," as he has "now no character that I wish to vindicate," but to complete *Falkland's* tale, so that "thy story may be fully understood" (337) (emphasis mine). Caleb's tale begins as told directly to the reader and with the purpose of narrating his way to justice, seeking absolution from the reader for crimes he did not commit; it ends with an address only to Falkland for the purpose of liberating his master from the cold judgment of history.

Caleb's extreme desire to narrate justice is curious given that he personally knows he is guilty of no legal crime and given that, in the end, he is publicly vindicated by a legal tribunal. And yet this desire is understandable if we read Caleb as a subject, and thus as subjugated, owing to his communal, subjective merging with Falkland, or, in Althusserian terms, his interpolated self. Nicholas M. Williams explicitly argues for an Althusserian reading of subjectivity in *Caleb Williams*, noting that the novel critiques subjectivity in what would eventually become Althusserian terms (486). For Althusser identity is inexorably tied to interpellation, which is the process through which an

⁶ Similarly, Fludernik has found that "Godwin's men and women are by their very nature actuated by a drive for reason and justice" ("Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy" 5). Sue Chaplin comments that Godwin joins Paine in stressing "the contingency of juridical subjectivity," in which subjectivity is formed based on whether one's future self would feel bound by laws instituted in one's present-self generation (120).

individual is recognized and hailed as a particular one, a specific someone; he or she recognizes being hailed as this specific someone and recognizes the connection between the one hailing and himself or herself, and answers the hailing, thereby becoming transformed from an individual into a subject. Althusser suggests that

ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (174)

It is with the turning of the “you,” what Althusser calls the “mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion” (174), that the “you” becomes a subject by the very action of recognizing that the hail was addressed to him or her and that it was really he or she who was hailed. Indeed, *Caleb Williams* emphasizes the intersection of recognition and guilt (for example, Falkland cannot tolerate being recognized as the murderer of Tyrrel, or if a disguised Caleb is recognized he will be sent back to prison).

In “‘Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All,’” Judith Butler comments on the criminalizing, or at least self-implicating, aspect of Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Butler explains that the hail always carries within it a charge, that the “Hey, you there!” is “a demand to align oneself with the law . . . and an entrance into the language of self-ascription—‘Here I am’—through the appropriation of guilt” (6). It is through ideological recognition, and its attendant material practices—shaking hands, inviting one in—that subjects are interpellated. Butler goes on to ponder, “What is the significance in turning to face the voice of the law? This turning toward the voice of the law is a sign of

a certain desire to be beheld by and perhaps also to behold the face of authority” (11).

And yet this ideology does not disappear at the doorstep of private homes and thoughts, as ideology is always already inscribed into our experiential framework. Althusser explains

what . . . seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology: ideology never says, “I am ideological.” (175)

More than just an inscription in our class and gender membership, ideology is inscribed into one’s very identity as a subject because ideology interpolates individuals as subjects (170); ideology speaks to individuals and makes them subjects. The narrative process may “make” individuals subjects, but there is no fixed time at which this process is either initiated or completed. Althusser notes that the process of hailing-recognition-subjectivization is actually atemporal. He explains this apparent inconsistency by stressing that because ideology is eternal, interpellation has always already happened; individuals have always already been interpellated into subjects.⁷

⁷ While Althusser is clear that interpellation is an atemporal process, it is interesting that one denotation of “interpolate” is to interrupt a person who is speaking or to break in or interrupt a process or action (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). Thus, despite the atemporal nature of the Althusserian interpolative process, we may linguistically, at least, pin the time and place in which one is “interpolated.”

This process-based, relational identity formation theory mirrors the narrative textual construction of *Caleb Williams*,⁸ both in how the individual narrative tales of injustice “make” the novel and in how these same tales unjustly “make” individuals. Characters in *Caleb Williams* are defined by their guilt or innocence, or by their power position in relation to the law: they either “make,” that is, write, the law, or the law “makes,” that is, imprisons or emancipates, them. Perhaps the seeming inability of the characters to escape from the ideological dictates of the law—even if some can escape from the physical confines of the judicial system—is what leads Sue Chaplin to conclude that Godwin’s novel forms characters who are defined juridically: “the subject is always already under the law’s command, caught by the law’s generality” and, thus, a “juridical subject is a guilty subject” (123). Judith Butler’s explanation of how interpellation, including submission to the dominant ideology, makes suspects out of individuals notes:

The “submission” to the rules of dominant ideology might . . . be understood as a submission to the necessity to prove innocence in the face of accusation, a submission to the demand for proof, an execution of that proof, and the acquisition of the status of the subject in and through a compliance with the terms of the interrogative law. To become a “subject” is, thus, to have been presumed guilty, then tried and declared innocent. (16)

I argue that *Caleb Williams* rejects this outcome of innocence. Indeed, in my reading of the novel, the question becomes not whether Caleb in reality broke a specific law pertaining to stealing from one’s master—he did not—but whether the narrative

⁸ The notion of text-as-process and the attendant idea of the individual-as-communal process is more radically enacted in Blake’s texts, which I discuss in the next chapter.

surrounding this accusation becomes real enough to be true in terms of constructing his identity as a subversive thief.

Narrative (in)justice and sublime truth?

From the opening page of *Caleb Williams*, the eponymous, first-person narrator of the novel makes no attempt to mask the fact that his purpose in memorializing his story is to narrate his way to a more palatable existence and an eventual legacy of justice:

I have not deserved this treatment. My own conscience witnesses in behalf of that innocence, my pretensions to which are regarded in the world as incredible. There is now, however, little hope that I shall escape from the toils that universally beset me. I am incited to the penning of these memoirs only by a desire to divert my mind from the deplorableness of my situation, and a faint idea that posterity may by their means be induced to render me a justice which my contemporaries refuse. (5)

Caleb hopes that in future generations his narrative will serve to reanimate him back into a subject and eradicate the way in which he has been objectified as a subject of the law. As the reader learns, “the toils” that have beset Caleb refer to the way in which he has been physically hunted and psychologically persecuted for having discovered that his “master” Falkland murdered Falkland’s social equal, Squire Tyrrel, and allowed a farmer to be found guilty of the crime. Certainly for Caleb, having access to *this* truth is not sublime. Indeed, the way Caleb structures his narrative—both in plot and in material construction—suggests that the process of *narrating* the truth is a more potent, human(e), and ultimately sublime event than the revelation of the truth itself.

In the limited critical conversation pertaining to the uses of the sublime in *Caleb Williams*, scholars have noted that the commitment to reveal the truth—and specifically the truth that rectifies injustice—constitutes the sublime. Fludernik locates the source of the sublime in *Caleb Williams* in the “sublimity of virtue” as embodied in “the human sublime, that is, great men of exalted virtue” (861). She explains that “virtue” in the novel is equated with “genuine sympathy and love that wins out over the tyrannical counterpart of sublimity (despotism, terror, vengeance)” (864), and that the “true sublime” exists only in a society imbued with justice and equality (888). Although Fludernik considers Godwin to be conflating the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime (describing Godwin’s use of “sympathetic sublimity” (889))⁹ as I do, my argument furthers this reading of Godwin’s aesthetics and regards the narrative and juridical-subjective processes as essential to his aesthetics.

For example, in the novel’s published ending (which Godwin revised soon after completing the original manuscript ending), truth does prevail, and yet it is quite specifically the *telling* of the truth rather than the *content* of its message that is so revered. Even after Falkland has died and Caleb has been legally vindicated, Caleb as

⁹ Fludernik’s use of the term “sympathetic sublimity” is strikingly similar to Wollstonecraft’s own phrase “sublime sensibility,” a phrase which I discuss extensively in Chapter 2. Curiously, Fludernik posits that Wollstonecraft “rejects[] the aesthetics of the sublime” (888). While in Chapter 2 I demonstrate that Wollstonecraft radically *reconstitutes* the aesthetics of the sublime, I refute the claim that Wollstonecraft rejects these aesthetic categories all together.

narrator is compelled to continue the narrative process as the only way to reinstate

Falkland's character:

I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character. I have now no character that I wish to vindicate: but I will finish them that thy story may be fully understood; and that, if those errors of thy life be known which thou so ardently desiredst to conceal, the world may at least not hear and repeat a half-told and mangled tale. (337)

On the first page of the novel, Caleb asserts his hope that his memoirs may “render me a justice which my contemporaries refuse”; at the close of the novel, however, even though he has been vindicated under the written law, Caleb insists that he has “now no character that I wish to vindicate.” Given the fact that Caleb has never wavered in his innocence, why should his legal vindication at the end of the novel undermine rather than bolster his character? Anderson reads this discrepancy as an indication that “the novel suggests that a good story is more powerful—and ultimately more dangerous—than a true story” (100). Rajan frames the relationship in the novel between narrative and truth as privileging the notion of process: “truth cannot be something known in advance, but is the totality of a text's effects and the attempt to understand them” (347). I contend that the deconstruction of the *narrator* (i.e., Caleb) is directly tied to the fact that despite his best efforts at narrating his way to justice, truth according to the narratively inscribed law can never produce justice according to “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.”

Truth, just like identity, in *Caleb Williams* is a process that is not governed by strict adherence to juridical concerns. Anderson argues that the emphasis on narrativity

in the novel in conjunction with the fact that the reader already knows that Falkland is guilty under the law for Tyrrel's murder suggest that legal imperatives alone cannot render "true" verdicts about Caleb's—or any character's—ultimate guilt or innocence; rather, readers must look to ethical concerns to make these judgments (349).¹⁰ As further evidence for the necessity of ethics, Anderson posits that the revised ending of the text "presses beyond the formalities of the legal hearing to put Caleb and Falkland in a face-to-face relationship, also removing the agents of 'administrative justice' present in the polemically angry first ending" (350).¹¹ I agree that justice in *Caleb Williams* is not found pursuant to the written law. I contend, however, that justice is not necessarily found in "truth" alone either; if this were the case, then the revelation about Caleb's innocence at the end of the published novel would have produced an empowering rather than enervating effect on Caleb. Further complicating the effect of truth on characters in

¹⁰ Wallace reads *Caleb Williams* as demonstrating "the limited efficacy of rational discourse to uncover a universal 'truth' and to overcome the systemic problems of law, court system, primogeniture, family honor, and social prejudice" (60). The novel instead prompts readers to respond "both emotionally to the scenes of suffering and to reasonable argument overheard among the characters" so that they may make judgments based in "philosophical choices and systems of familial relations" (60). Similarly, Ward describes Godwin as fostering the belief that "a genuinely progressive and tolerant society cannot be understood in terms of its laws or institutions of government, but only as an expression human love and compassion" (23).

¹¹ The emphasis on justice according to a "face-to-face relationship" is at the heart of Levinasian subjectivity.

the novel is that the original manuscript ending, in which the truth about Caleb remains hidden, is both radically different from and markedly similar to the published ending.

In the manuscript ending of the novel, Caleb is banished from the magistrate's quarters and berated for casting aspersions on Falkland's innocent character after Caleb accuses Falkland of murdering Tyrrel. The magistrate scolds: "Be silent! . . . What is it you intend by thus continuing to intrude yourself? Do you believe you can overbear and intimidate us? We will hear none of your witnesses. We have heard you too long. Never was the dignity of administrative justice in any instance insulted with so bare faced and impudent a forgery!" (342). Certainly, this ending differs sharply from the published ending, in which Caleb's accusation against Falkland is believed. Yet just as in the published ending, in this ending Caleb describes himself as a disintegrated trace, as an inscription on a grave stone, "an obelisk to tell you, here lies what was once a man!" (346). Even more startling, Caleb exclaims that sensibility "is all folly," and that "[t]rue happiness lies in being like a stone" (346). Given that in both endings what remains is Caleb's disembodied narrating voice, it seems that Godwin is suggesting that the real folly is in not using the power of narration to enact justice. Indeed, in a "real-world" situation that has striking parallels to the world of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin urged his friend and writer Joseph Gerrald to rewrite legality based on Gerrald's narrative prowess.

In January, 1794, Godwin delivered a letter to Gerrald, who was in a Scottish prison awaiting trial for sedition. Gerrald, who was arrested while attending a meeting to promote annual parliaments and male voting rights, would be afforded the opportunity to speak before the jury; he, like Caleb, would have a chance to narrate his way to justice,

or, as Godwin expresses it, “telling a tale upon which the happiness of nations depend” (356). Godwin writes that whether the jury finds the facts to support the charge of sedition true or false will depend *not* on the written law at hand, but on whether or not Gerrald’s tale “speak[s] to all the genuine feelings of the human heart” (356). In other words, just as Wollstonecraft’s protagonist will do in the later *Maria*, Godwin urges Gerrald to make an argument for jury nullification.

Godwin instructs Gerrald that in making his appeal to the hearts and “recesses of their souls” (356), the jurors must come to believe that sublime truth, not inflexible adherence to the law, must guide their judgments. Godwin’s language is striking similar to that employed later by Wollstonecraft in *Maria*, when the protagonist of her novel exclaims: “I appeal to the justice and humanity of the jury – a body of men, whose private judgment must be allowed to modify laws, that must be unjust, because definite rules can never apply to indefinite circumstances” (144). Godwin suggests that Gerrald should tell the jury that casting judgment in this case is not simply a referendum on one individual charge, but on whether humanity is able to recognize true justice. He writes that Gerrald should argue the following: “I have been told that there are men upon whom truth, truth fully and adequately stated, will make no impression. It is a vile and groundless calumny upon the character of the human mind. This is my theory, and I now come before *you* for the practice” (356). Just as Wollstonecraft’s jurisprudential theory places belief in the transformative nature of a “sublime sensibility” that spurs people to enact justice in the face of unjust written laws, Godwin believes that the jury will acquit Gerrald if he can show the jury members that Gerrald is “actuated by pure philanthropy

and benevolence, and [has] no selfish motives” (357). The use of the word “actuated” here demonstrates the intimate connection between human subjectivity and human(e) justice. In his letter to Gerrald, Godwin skillfully equates not being sensible to the sublime truth of a justice that is “paramount to the English constitution, to all written Law and parchment constitutions” (357) with not being human, an equation he cultivates fully in *Caleb Williams*.

Sensibility, justice, hospitality

The law in *Caleb Williams* is not only deeply unjust, but monstrously inhumane. Caleb unabashedly asserts that “the law has neither eyes, nor ears, nor bowels of humanity; and it turns into marble the hearts of all those that are nursed in its principles” (288). In the novel, the inhumanity of the law is perpetuated through writing that is sanctioned by the system in the form of parliamentary enactments and precedent set by judicial opinions, and by socially enforced customs and codes of conduct. Both modes of oppression are represented as unjust not necessarily because they are unreasonable, but because they intimate the deprivation of human sensibility that not only causes economic or representative injustice, but that creates a fracture among people that law alone cannot heal. By using the rhetoric of sensibility to characterize the monstrosity of written laws and social customs in *Caleb Williams*, Godwin restructures this traditionally “private,” aesthetic category into one capable of critiquing one of the most “public,” human concerns: how justice operates in a community.

Perhaps the starkest example of the severely inhuman(e), diseased system of justice in the novel is the impotence of the law to protect the lower classes of society. After Hawkins, Tyrrel's tenant, refuses to admit his son into Tyrrel's service ("I will lose all that I have, and go to day-labour, and my son too, if needs must; but I will not make a gentleman's servant of him" (74)), Tyrrel orders Hawkins to quit the farm to which Hawkins holds a lease. Hawkins retorts that he will not give up the farm to which he has a legal and moral right, exclaiming to Tyrrel: "I hope there is some law for poor folk, as well as for rich" (75). In relating this story, Caleb laments that "Hawkins (to borrow the language of the world) was guilty in this affair of double imprudence" (75). Not only did Hawkins "[talk] to his landlord in a more preemptory manner than the constitution and practices of this country allow a dependant to assume," but he also "above all, having been thus hurried away by his resentment, . . . ought to have foreseen the consequences" (75).

The "language of the world" of *Caleb Williams* inscribes guilt and innocence according to social rank, not according to legal right. Indeed, Hawkins is "guilty" of the crime of thinking he could bring an action under the written law when he was only a "fawn contending with a lion":¹²

Nothing could have been more easy to predict, than that it was of no avail for [Hawkins] to have right on his side when his adversary had influence and wealth, and therefore could so victoriously justify any extravagancies that he might think proper to commit. This maxim was completely illustrated in the sequel. Wealth and despotism easily know how to engage those laws as the coadjutors of their

¹² Godwin's use of animal metaphor here is interesting given the way in which he describes the law as inhumane and un-human.

oppression, which were perhaps at first intended (witless and miserable precaution!) for the safeguards of the poor. (75)

While Godwin explicitly condemns the way “wealth and despotism” take mastery of the law, even when the victim of this injustice has “right on his side,” what is particularly effective is the way in which he equates the effects of this inhumane, legal inequity with the individual human heart and the prospects for communal justice. Once Hawkins realizes that a legal remedy for him and his son has been paralyzed under “the tyranny of wealth” and the “advantages which our laws and customs give to the rich over the poor,” Hawkins’s “heart died within him” (78). Godwin thus suggests that justice exists not in the realm of impersonal, inflexible written law but rather in the interpersonal, relational exchange of emotions at the heart of sensibility.

Throughout the novel, the rhetoric of sensibility is repeatedly conflated with connotations of justice and egalitarian community. Before Falkland’s “sensibility . . . shrunk up and [became] withered by events the most disgusting to his feelings” (11), he was characterized by “indefatigable humanity” and “justice in the form of man” (47). Falkland himself uses the rhetoric of sensibility to define what he regards as a communal duty to attempt to equalize the injustice inherent in the system of severely segregated classes. Falkland exclaims that “[i]t makes one’s heart ache” (80) to think that birth alone will determine the entirety of a person’s life regardless of that person’s innate or developed skills and qualities. He argues to Mr Tyrrel that the upper class

must do every thing in our power to lighten the yoke of these unfortunate people. We must not use the advantage that accident has given us with an unmerciful hand. Poor wretches! They are pressed almost beyond bearing as it is; and, if we

unfeelingly give another turn to the machine, they will be crushed into atoms.
(80)

This exchange demonstrates one of the ways Godwin radicalizes the theory of sensibility. While traditional aesthetic paradigms of sensibility demand some form of spectacle¹³ to invoke a sympathetic response, Godwin's characters (like Falkland in the quotation above) show that thinking about the realities of social injustice on a larger scale are enough to prompt one to act to remedy this injustice. For Godwin, true justice is not formed by written laws but rather by "a sentiment that binds our community" (Ward 27). Indeed, fractures within the community and downfalls of individuals in the novel are primarily brought on by the way in which the law is severed from human sensibility.

Monstrous acts and inhumane characters abound in *Caleb Williams*, although Tyrrel is cast as the most egregious actor who uses the law to justify his insensible malice. Tyrrel's tyrannical¹⁴ behavior is consistently described as "unfeeling," just as

¹³ In "Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy in *Caleb Williams*," Fludernik notes that some critics fault Adam Smith's theory as advocating a panoptic surveillance among community members. Fludernik argues that unlike Bentham, Smith's (and Godwin's according to Fludernik) theory requires "sympathetic projection" that "relies on a projective exchange of glances" (7). While my argument is in accord with Fludernik's reading of Godwin's notion of sensibility as "mutual sympathy between *equals*" (7, my emphasis), I do not regard Godwin's theory as relying on a specular element. Fludernik supports her argument by identifying the "theatrical quality" of the trial scenes in *Caleb Williams* as epitomizing the way sympathy works in the novel.

¹⁴ No doubt the phonemic mirroring of "Tyrrel"/"tyrannical"/"tyrant" did not go unnoticed by Godwin.

feeling is written out of the law in the way some characters regard legal codes. When Tyrrel summons his lawyer, Barnes, to initiate an arrest of Emily, Tyrrel's orphaned niece, for debt, his lawyer exclaims, "'Arrest her! Why she does not owe you a brass farthing: she always lived upon your charity!'" (85). Asserting that he "has no mercy for her" (86), Tyrrel balks at Barnes, who "had for several years been the instrument of Mr Tyrrel's injustice," and retorts: "The law justifies it. — What do you think laws were made for?" (85). Notably, when the officers appear at Emily's sick bed to take her to jail, her caretaker "expostulated with bitter invective against the hardheartedness of the bailiff, and exhorted him to mix some humanity and moderation with the discharge of his function; but he was impenetrable to all she could urge" (88). When the caretaker tells the bailiffs that if they remove Emily from her bed it will kill her, they reply: "'The law says nothing about that. We have orders to take her sick or well. We will do her no harm; except so far as we must perform our office, be it how it will'" (88).

That the law is insensible to matters of the heart¹⁵ in *Caleb Williams* runs counter to Godwin's statement in his letter to Gerrald: "Never forget that juries are men, and that men are made of penetrable stuff" (356). The men in the novel who are agents of injustice, like Tyrrel, are markedly *not* made of penetrable stuff. For example, Grimes,

¹⁵ Ian Ward has noted that Godwin's theory of justice is rooted in a deep love of humanity (41). Ward traces Godwinian justice to Rousseau's notion of justice, which Ward describes as: "if politics is about human relations, then politics is about compassion and love" (28).

whom Tyrrel employs to force Emily into marriage¹⁶ as retribution for the “tender sentiments” (50) she developed towards Tyrrel’s rival, Falkland, is characterized as inhuman in his physical appearance as well as inhumane in his sentiments. “His complexion was scarcely human; his features were coarse, and strangely discordant and disjointed from each other,” and “he was a total stranger to tenderness; he could not feel for those refinements in others, of which he had no experience in himself” (50). Given that even the characters who are described as at one time possessing acute sensibility and a focused notion of humane, communal justice (namely, Falkland and Caleb himself) become mentally and physically ruined, one could argue that the novel leaves no space for the ability to enact productive justice even beyond the law. And yet it is precisely beyond the law—in a community of outlaws under the direction of “Captain” Raymond—that the novel locates egalitarian, humane justice borne from “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy.”

Given the fact that Raymond’s community operates outside the strictures of logocentrally sanctioned written laws and social customs, it is not surprising that Caleb never fixes a formal appellation on the community. Indeed, almost no members of the

¹⁶ The parallels between Emily and Grimes and Wollstonecraft’s Maria and Venables are striking. Not only is Emily confined to an isolated, locked, towering, prison-like structure just as Maria is, but the impending marriage, which Emily has no meaningful way to reject, will strip Emily of her legal rights as an individual in the same way the law mutes the married Maria. Indeed, the reader’s consternation about whether Emily will successfully escape *before* her marriage is directly tied to the fact that, *after* her marriage, Emily will have no way legally (and almost certainly no way practically) to flee from Grimes.

community are individuated through naming save for Captain Raymond¹⁷ and Gines.¹⁸ Raymond refers to members as “comrades,” emphasizing the communal structure of this motley crew that puts into practice the egalitarian ideals of coexisting without regard to class. Caleb remarks of the comrades: “Their appearance was different, some having the air of mere rustics, and others that of a tarnished sort of gentry” (223). Even Raymond, the “Captain” of the society, explicitly rejects any authoritarian impulse or power. When Raymond appeals to the community to vote to ban Gines from the group due to his repeatedly cruel and insensible behavior, he exclaims: “I do not pretend . . . to assume any authority among you; act as you think proper; but, so far as relates to myself, I vote that Gines be expelled from among us as a disgrace to our society” (224).

The specific “disgrace” to which Raymond refers is Gines’s extreme lack of sensibility, which causes him to privilege monetary concerns above acting justly towards

¹⁷ The distinction of “Captain” is curious and leads to multiple and opposing connotations. The militaristic association with “Captain” suggests a counter-reading of Raymond as an equal comrade. However, a naval emphasis suggests that the group operates according to different rules and expectations from that of the rest of English society, for once a ship enters waters certain distances from the shoreline, admiralty law begins. Admiralty laws are sharply independent from those governing land-bound society. Still further, “Captains” of non-military vessels are the sole arbiters of the rules of their ships and decisions about their crew. Such a reading of this word can connote imperialistic fervor, yet can just as easily connote the ability to construct laws that are beneficial to all members of a limited community.

¹⁸ Just as “Tyrrel”/“tyrant”/“tyrannical” effects a phonemic mirroring, so too does “Gines”/“Grimes.” Both Gines and Grimes are presented as insensible agents of injustice.

others. In contrast, Caleb describes Raymond as possessing “fervent benevolence” (233), and the other members of the society characterized by “benevolence and kindness; they were strongly susceptible of emotions of generosity” (227). When Raymond questions Gines what provoked Gines to inflict the “cruel treatment” of physically beating and then abandoning Caleb in the woods, Gines answers: “Provocation enough. He had no money” (224). After Raymond voices his disgust with such behavior, Gines states: ““You, with your compassion, and your fine feelings, will bring us all to the gallows”” (224). In Raymond’s response to this charge, he elucidates the jurisprudential theory of the community. Openly accepting that there is danger in the way in which the comrades break laws to enact justice, Raymond proudly explains that their “profession is the profession of justice,” and that “[w]e, who are thieves without a licence, are at open war with another set of men who are thieves according to law” (224).

For Raymond, “justice” is defined as acting beyond the artificial—and accidental by birth—barriers of class and legally sanctioned codes that are written for the wealthy and inscribe abuse on the poor. According to Raymond, there is no justifiable middle ground for justice: a person can “[e]ither be the friend of the law, or its adversary” (231). Raymond’s view that the law is not only futile but oppressive and unjust for the majority of people is reminiscent of Caleb’s own realization about the absurd idea that “England has no Bastille” (188). While the actual Bastille may be located in France, Caleb notes that the same “tyranny and wanton oppression” symbolized by the dreaded Bastille exist throughout England. For this reason, Raymond argues, the “law is not the proper instrument for correcting the misdeeds of mankind” (231). This is not to say,

however, that Raymond's community does not have shared "laws," perhaps the most important of which is the law of hospitality. Despite *Caleb Williams*'s radical message that the laws of hospitality must supersede written laws and social customs, there has been almost no critical attention paid to this aspect of the novel. While some scholars mention, seemingly in passing, how Raymond "preach[es] an anarchism that denies the authority of the law in order to preserve that of humanity and justice" (Ward 34) or that Raymond and the "outlaws" demonstrate how Godwin presents "the workings of morality as sympathetic affect" (Fludernik, "Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy" 27), these observations are brief and do not fold in a reading of hospitality into their discussion.

Emphasizing justice as ethical encounter, seen in Helen Maria Williams's "An American Tale" and later theorized by Derrida and Levinas, Godwin himself uses the term "laws of hospitality" to explain the responsibility that the community has to welcome and do justice to Caleb even in the face of grave danger for doing so. When the society learns that there is a price on Caleb's head, it considers turning him over to the law to collect the one hundred guineas. Raymond incredulously questions whether his comrades would violate the laws of hospitality for a monetary reward, particularly when Caleb is not guilty of the charges at issue. Raymond demands to know who of the society dares to believe that the law is equitable enough even to offer Caleb a fair trial: "'Who ever thinks, when [Caleb] is apprehended for trial, of his innocence or guilt being at all material to the issue?'" (232). Making an argument strikingly similar to the one Wollstonecraft will make in the courtroom scene in *Maria*, as well as to the one Godwin

himself makes to Gerrald, Raymond explicitly asks: “‘If no other person have the courage to set limits to the tyranny of courts of justice, shall not we? . . . Shall we, against whom the whole species is in arms, refuse our protection to an individual more exposed to, but still less deserving of their persecution than ourselves?’” (233). After considering Raymond’s plea, the comrades determine that they will “protect him at the hazard of our lives” (233).

In *Caleb Williams*, Raymond and the “gang” of outlaws, whose actions are prescribed according to the laws of hospitality, are exceedingly more just than any of the “law-abiding” characters, whose actions are prescribed by written laws and codified social customs. Despite the fact that many of the outlaws have a gruff exterior and all of the outlaws live as “rustics,” they possess finer sensibility than the most exalted Squire Falkland *because* they act according to the laws of hospitality. These unwritten laws, which are based in relational, empathetic human exchange, require that one acknowledge the communal nature of “individual” existence and act in a way that privileges communal interests over those of one’s own self. This is a heavy burden and significantly exceeds the requirements of acting merely with benevolence or philanthropy.

This distinction between hospitality and philanthropy appears in Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795): “we are here concerned not with philanthropy, but with *right*. In this context, *hospitality* means the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory” (105). By placing hospitality within traditional juridical discourse (hospitality is a stranger’s *right*), Kant challenges our traditional notion of what it means to act *lawfully*. Godwin enacts

the same rewriting and suggests that to act according to the laws of hospitality, to place the needs and demands of another, even those of a *stranger*, over one's own interests is "the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy." In *Caleb Williams*, hospitality is justice, and hospitality—and thus justice—is found beyond political institutions and legal mandates. If "the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy" are the harbingers of justice, then perhaps aesthetics as a mode of expressing human injustice does offer an opening for the possibility of justice. After all, as we will see in the next chapter, according to William Blake, "The most sublime act is to set another before you."

CHAPTER V
 “SWIFT WINGED WORDS”: LAWLESSNESS AND
 WILLIAM BLAKE’S ONTOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

For Mercy has a human heart
 Pity, a human face:
 And Love, the human form divine,
 And Peace, the human dress.
 — William Blake, “The Divine Image”

All Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder
 — William Blake, Annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*

Vision, the exemptive sublime, and the justice of regenerating meaning

Like the texts I have discussed thus far, William Blake’s work reconfigures the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime. However, while Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin reorganize these traditional aesthetic categories in ways that challenge the legal and social status quo, privilege egalitarianism, and deconstruct the distance between the individual and the community, the categories remain largely intact and recognizable. Blake goes dramatically further. In this chapter, I argue that in *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), Blake transforms *sensibility* into what he calls *Vision*¹ and *the sublime* into what I term *the exemptive sublime*. Blake equates the Enlightenment’s

¹ I use the capital form of this word both as a way to honor Blake’s transcriptive choices as well as to emphasize to the reader the stark difference between Blake’s concept of “Vision” and “vision,” which I discuss at length below.

privileging of reason and empiricism with the unjust tyranny of limited vision, condemning vision as the “vegetative,” biological, mortal, and Enlightenment eye. Because single, empirical vision relies only on the ocular sense, Blake describes it as deadened and ineffective as “Newton’s sleep” (Letter to Thomas Butts, E722). In contrast, Vision is “fourfold” and a “supreme delight” (Letter to Thomas Butts, E722) and requires multiple engagement with all senses. In this chapter, I demonstrate how rejecting vision and electing to see with Vision provides access to the exemptive sublime, which I conceive as a space of justice that is exempt from interpretive mandates constrained by logocentrism, binary constructions, and hegemony. In Blake’s rewriting, Vision and the exemptive sublime cease to be solely aesthetic categories and are instead modes by which people can liberate themselves from the tyranny of “mind-forg’d manacles.” Thus, there is a direct correlation between Vision, the exemptive sublime, and the justice of regenerating meaning according to one’s own interpretive constructions.

Blake’s approach to justice and the law, like his approach to the aesthetic categories sensibility and the sublime, is also more radical than that of Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin. Although in *Caleb Williams* Godwin disputes the legitimacy of institutionally enacted laws in favor of a system of justice governed by “the sublime of true virtue and the pathos of true sympathy,” he addresses specific failures pertaining to the inequity of legal enfranchisement. Similarly, in *Letters* Williams advocates for the abolition of primogeniture, and Wollstonecraft argues against the laws of *coverture* in *Maria*. In contrast, Blake does not propose amending or abolishing

particular laws or even the legal system itself to bring about social equality. Justice, for Blake, is grounded in a radical reconceptualization of meaning, namely, a revision of what it means to be free versus imprisoned, enlightened versus blinded, vital versus deadened. Emphasizing the relationship between meaning and being, representation and ontology, at the center of Blake's texts, Saree Makdisi has noted that Blake's art "presupposes a new way of sharing, of loving, of living, of being, *in common*" (*Impossible History* 263; emphasis in the original).

Just as the element of being "in common," or what I have been describing as communal subjectivity, is essential to the rewritten sensibility and the sublime of Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin, this element is similarly at the center of Blake's Vision and the exemptive sublime. Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin reconstruct aesthetic categories to argue for an egalitarian social justice that acknowledges the intersubjectivity of *all* people. Similarly, Blake's Vision is grounded in the notion of multiplicity, of engagement with all senses without assimilation of one sense (namely, the ocular sense) over the others. Further, the experience of the exemptive sublime arises as a reader squarely rejects the tyrannical and authoritarian idea that there is a single, lawful interpretation (namely, meaning derived from the Word). Multiplicity in Blake's texts, however, exists not just in textual (or aesthetic) representation, but in the very "being" (or ontology) of the texts themselves, in Blake's ontological aesthetics.

The material form of Blake's texts contain an ontological vitality that is based in the idea of nonassimilated multiplicity. W. J. T. Mitchell, in *Blake's Composite Art*, explains the interactive relationship between Blake's verbal and visual designs as if the

designs possess ontological vibrancy, noting that “their relationship is more like an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between vigorously independent modes of expression” (4). This “visual-verbal dialectics,” as Mitchell calls it, resists dominance by or assimilation of one design form over the other even though they “must be read as a unity”; thus, the verbal and visual designs contain both multiplicity and singularity (3-4). To ignore the dynamics of Blake’s “composite art” is to read with single vision, or, as Peter Otto argues, “to return such dualisms to a primordial unity [that] . . . for Blake is constitutive of the Fall” (43). Building upon Makdisi’s concept of how Blake’s texts suggest a “new way of . . . being, *in common*,” in this chapter I argue that this new way of being in common extends to the way a Blakean reader with Vision can experience the space of multiplicity of meaning that is the exemptive sublime.

My interpretation of Vision and the exemptive sublime have explicit implications for juridical and aesthetic paradigms. For Blake, seeing with Vision is the ability to resist not only unjust political and social structures but also to reject conventional interpretive patterns that are grounded specifically in binary Enlightenment aesthetics, particularly in those tropes equating light and the ocular sense with insight, and darkness, void, and chaos with epistemological, ontological, and creative impotence. Seeing with multiple, inspired, infinite Vision requires one to refute orthodox, culturally and legally sanctioned systems and modes of thinking; Vision opens for the reader a generative space of liberty that is the exemptive sublime. Whereas Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin rewrite sensibility and the sublime to *represent* the democratization of difference, the value of natural rights over those of written laws, and the communal component to “individual”

identity, these same elements are actually *manifest* in the material form of Blake's "composite art." A way of reading that is anti-logocentric and, thus, anti-juridical is to deny the authority not only of a particular law but of the Law—the Word—of God. This is the liberating denial that resides at the heart of Vision, the exemptive sublime, and Blake's *Urizen*.

Ostensibly about the Edenic creation of the human form, *Urizen* is far from paradisaical. A rewriting of the original creation story, it is a design of building up and tearing down, extreme shackling and enthusiastic freedom, lighted torments and the darkness of knowing. Propelled by the open, porous, unstable, and dynamic relation of words and images that parallels the progressive energy created by contraries as conceived by Blake,² the design itself enacts interpretive freedom. *Urizen* is not only *about* regeneration; the design *enacts* regeneration because for Blake, art is "a creative and *ontological* activity, rather than simply a representational or epistemological one" (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 263; emphasis in the original). By engaging the text with Vision, *Urizen*'s reader can deny the tyranny of single vision and single meaning that Blake equates with the Enlightenment; she can regenerate Enlightenment epistemological and ontological discourse so that places of void and darkness become places of

² In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes "Without Contraries is no progression" (3, E34). Contraries, for Blake, enact progression and not nullification. Contraries do not cancel each other out; rather, contraries create a space of mutability and an energy of possibility and, I argue, can open the exemptive sublime. I further discuss the relationship between the state of contraries and the exemptive sublime in this chapter below.

productive insight. In this chapter I demonstrate how, with its emphasis on the importance of inspired Vision over empirical sight and absolute reliance on reason, *Urizen* opens the exemptive sublime, generating a space of liberty in which the anti-juridical reader questions hegemonic doctrine. Whereas Blake's rejection of conventional Enlightenment aesthetics has been the subject of lively and productive scholarship in the field of Romantic-era studies, my argument considers Blake's radical aesthetics not as an endpoint, but rather as a mode of inquiry to investigate and highlight the similarities between Blake's unconventional figurations of tropes and the unorthodox interpretive field that is opened for the reader as a direct result of approaching a Blakean text with Vision. In this chapter, I hope to regenerate the frequently flawed, critical discourse surrounding *Urizen* and counter the critical tendency to read the text via conservative paradigms of "blindness and insight or subversion and containment" (Cooper 191-92) that the text itself rejects.

Prior to my discussion of Blake's ontological aesthetics and the justice of regenerated meaning in *Urizen*, I explicate how rejecting the tyranny of single vision leads to egalitarian social justice by considering two texts among Blake's most familiar works. In "The Little Black Boy" (from *Songs of Innocence*, 1789) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), Blake complicates notions of light, darkness, and void to suggest that Vision requires not just a new way of seeing, but also new ways of being and reading. In "The Little Black Boy," Blake's design does not merely represent the theme of the sinfulness of slavery; the material composition itself challenges the reader to condemn not only the *institution* of slavery, but the way in which she makes meaning of

what is worthy of condemnation. It is via Blake's ontological aesthetics, rather than by thematic implication, that the design asks the reader to interrogate not just the juridical laws and social customs that enforce slavery, but the way she has been taught to see skin color with the single vision of the biological eye. Similarly, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the text complicates firmly entrenched associations about whether it is an angel of reason or a human being that possesses the most imaginative—and for Blake, ethical—prowess. By resituating the divine power to create meaning away from the angel and onto the human speaker, the plate encourages the reader to reject shackled, single, and mortal vision in favor of liberated, multiple, and infinite Vision, and to extend beyond the text the justice of regenerating meaning.

Regenerating meaning

Enlightenment epistemological discourse made a direct connection between empirical sight, ethical clarity, and progressive knowledge.³ In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin

³ The privileging of light in the discourse of knowledge long precedes the prominent role it played in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Ancient Greek philosophers revered the sense of sight as the highest sense (Jonas 312). Socrates likened the soul to an eye (Park 12), and Plato's allegory of the cave attributed the ability to know reality with the ability to see, an attribution that positioned the sun in the exalted position as the vehicle through which one could make meaning and come as close to Truth and Good as this limited world would allow (Park 13). However, perhaps nothing is stronger evidence of the centuries-long trust bestowed in seeing and light as conduits for perceiving reality and truth as the appellation given to the period of the Enlightenment, in which reason and experience as perceived by the five senses formed the basis for

Jay explains that the “ocularcentric bias” was so strong during the Enlightenment that Lockean and Cartesian thought characterized the mind as a camera obscura, and considered inexorable the tie between rationality and lucidity (85). In the popular periodical *The Spectator* (1712), Joseph Addison proclaimed “Our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses” (368), and in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid flatly stated that “Of all the faculties called the five senses, sight is without doubt the noblest” (77). In direct contrast to this mainstream discourse, in some of his earliest works Blake is already complicating notions of light, darkness, and void and attempting to “renovate sight” (Frosch 127) by emphasizing the importance of inspired Vision over empirical sight as a way to regenerate meaning about a more equitable, just community.⁴

knowledge and progress. Even subject formation itself was held to be at the mercy of empirical reception, a point perhaps best exemplified by John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which Locke states: “The soul begins to have Ideas when it begins to perceive. To ask at what time a man has first any ideas is to ask when he begins to perceive; having ideas and perception being the same thing” (93).

⁴ See Goldberg, “Byron, Blake, and Heaven,” in which Goldberg asserts that Blake conceives of a state of heaven in which distinctions between labor and leisure and between physical and mental work are erased. Applied to “The Little Black Boy,” this conception lifts Blake’s poem from the accusations of racism which some critics have assigned to it, for although work will continue in heaven for the little black boy, it will be the mental work of spiritually educating the uninitiated arrivals, such as the little white boy. For more on Blake’s activist poetics, see Tim Fulford, “A Romantic Technologist and Britain’s Little Black Boys.” Fulford’s article contrasts the efforts made by scientist Count Rumford and Blake to effect social reform, specifically as that reform related to

In “The Little Black Boy,” the word “black” carries both negative and positive connotations, suggesting to the reader that approaching the poem without Vision will produce a limited or even stymied interpretive experience. Initially, the verbal design seems to conform to European ideas about black bodies being savage bodies and white souls being good souls, as well as to the Enlightenment trope of light and dark that equates blackness with deprivation and death.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light. (9:1-4, E9).⁵

However, such conformity is called into question as the poem progresses and we realize that it is the black child who is afforded more ontological potency and epistemological prowess: it is the black boy who is animated through his speaking voice, and it is he who will instruct the white boy about how to receive divine love. The verbal design constructs an agency that is fluidly shared between the boys, that slips back and forth between the white and black faces. Similarly, in the visual design, there are variations in

the English “little black boys” who were employed as climbing boys (chimney sweeps) and the African boys who were owned as slaves. Fulford argues that Rumford was merely a “Sunday School abolitionist,” that is, someone who offered pity and charity to the poor and to the Africans, but only as a means to maintain the dominant social order and status quo. Blake, on the other hand, wrote socially progressive poetry which exposed the “psychology of sanctimony and its connections with Church and State” (42).

⁵ All references to the verbal element of Blake’s works are from David V. Erdman’s *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (E).

the African boy's skin color between different copies of the same design. For example, in the Bentley Copy G of the visual design depicting the two boys standing before a Jesus-like figure, both the African and European boys have light skin.



Figure 1: *Songs of Innocence*, "The Little Black Boy,"
Plate 30, Bentley Copy G (1789) (Yale Center for British Art)

However, in the Bentley Copy L of this same design, the African boy is much darker than the European boy.



Figure 2: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, “The Little Black Boy,” Plate 9, Bentley Copy L (1789-1794) (Yale Center for British Art)

This color variation in the African boy’s skin tone suggests a shifting, communal agency that is shared between the African and European boys. Commenting on how the notion of a disseminated (and disseminating) agency is not only found in the content of Blake’s designs but also in their form and materiality, Makdisi notes that in Blake’s designs “the supposed freedom of the sovereign individual is shown to be compromised by the extent to which selves and others exist in a dispersed and mutually dependent network that is not really compatible with a discourse of identity and difference” (*Impossible History* 6). The same network-reliant structure is found in the material form of the designs, “which share many verbal and visual elements, none of which can really be said to function in a genuinely sovereign sense, that is, as self-governing and independent from others” (7).

The same indeterminate identity and agency of the boys that exist in the verbal design and color variation of the visual design are also enacted in the pictorial image in the visual design, in which the black and white boys appear before a Jesus-like figure. In the image, the black boy stands behind the white boy, who is leaning into the figure with hands clasped as if in prayer. In one reading, the black boy is subservient to his white counterpart, as he is literally second in line to speak to Jesus. His identity is also defined by utility, as he appears to be holding up the white boy. Furthermore, the black boy appears to be an outsider standing in stark physical contrast to the white boy and Jesus, who share flowing, golden-colored hair and, in the Bentley Copy L plate, fair skin. In an alternate reading, it is the black boy who has already received Jesus' love. Behind the black boy is a rock that may also be read as a set of wings springing from the boy's back. Similarly, rather than serving a subordinate role to the white boy, the black boy could be introducing the white boy to Jesus, gently pushing him forward as the black boy teaches the white boy how to kneel and pray before Jesus.

Perhaps even more significant than what the black boy may be teaching the white boy, it is the black boy who instructs the *reader* about the vital difference between vision and Vision. In "The Formal Challenges of Antislavery Poetry," Jennifer Keith suggests that "Blake replaces European evaluations of black as demonic and white as angelic with [a] view of spirituality in relation to the sun" (112) in which, through Vision, we see that black bodies are darkened from God's (the sun's) excessive love. Speaking of the roles the boys come to play in the poem, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that the visual design puts the white boy "in the position of the lost soul who has been rescued by his black 'guardian

angel” (13). Significantly, the black boy states that his “sun-burnt face / Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove” (9:15-16, E9). Once again, understanding and seeing in “The Little Black Boy” is “an act of divine imagination rather than empirical observation” (Keith 113), as the boy’s face is presented as ethereal as a cloud, and is also transformed through simile into a *locus amoenus*,⁶ a pastoral locale for creative inspiration and refuge.

The ability to see the void as a *locus amoenus* if approached with Vision and Imagination—rather than reason alone—is dramatically enacted in another one of Blake’s early works, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In the Memorable Fancy that begins on plate 17, an Enlightenment Angel of reason⁷ approaches the speaker to warn the latter, “O pitiable foolish young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career” (E41). When the Angel takes the speaker to view the speaker’s “eternal lot,” they come to “a void boundless as a nether sky” (E41). Notably, the Angel is confined and terrified and joins his form to the bounded forms of earth by clinging to the roots of trees. Viewing the scene only with his vegetative eye of reason, the Angel, despite his divine appellation, possesses only single and limited empirical vision (Damon 134). In contrast, the speaker suggests that void may actually house Edenic “providence” and a space of freedom. Chastised by the Angel, the speaker, like the Angel, remains bounded to the tree until “By degrees we beheld the infinite Abyss, firey as the smoke of a burning city;

⁶ I thank Jennifer Keith for suggesting this reading of the shady grove to me.

⁷ For a discussion of the role angels of reason play in the history of Enlightenment thinking, see Stempel’s “Angels of Reason: Science and Myth in the Enlightenment,” and especially 72-74 for a treatment of the angel of the fourth Memorable Fancy.

beneath us at an immense distance was the sun, black but shining” (18, E41). The images of blackness, fire, and darkness continue repeatedly and furiously, as the speaker also describes appearances such as black and white spiders, a scaly, monstrous serpent, and the head of Leviathan with bloodied gills.

Once the Angel leaves, however, the speaker understands how single vision and tyrannical mandates about single, empiricist interpretation restrict his freedom. Without the Angel, the scene of the abyss is drastically changed. The speaker finds himself “sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp. & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (19, E42). Explaining to the Angel “All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics” (19, E42), the speaker acutely understands how to engage his “fourfold Vision” and not be confined to the single vision of empiricist reason. In *The Illuminated Blake*, Erdman poses whether this plate represents “the angel Reason, looking out upon nothing, contrasted to the red diabolic ‘young man’ who sees with imagination and senses” (114).⁸ Indeed, while traditional pastoral scenes take place in the light of day, the speaker’s pastoral is moon lit, indicating his unbounded freedom from the restraints of the sulphur sun of reason. S. Foster Damon explains that for Blake, the sun is the symbol of the imagination; however, it is only the spiritual sun, not the “sulphur sun,” that represents imagination (390). In contrast, the “sulphur sun,” which

⁸ Erdman also notes that in Copy I of this plate there is a pool beside the tree, which Erdman suggests may be an oasis. The presence of an oasis is particularly noteworthy within the context of my discussion of the void as a *locus amoenus*.

was rent from Mars during the spiritual warfare of the Eternals, is the sun of the material world, and is a symbol for reason (390). Thus, the unified sun is imagination, while the rent, divided sun is the heat of the material world; and the heat of the material world emanates from flames of fire that give heat but, significantly, *not* insight (139). This emphasis on the impotence of the sulphur sun of reason and the exaltation of the spiritual sun of imagination is an extreme rewriting of Enlightenment epistemological discourse, in which light and lucid reason are considered generative. It is because the speaker engages his multiple Vision that he is afforded interpretive freedom, a space of lawlessness characterized by anti-logocentric, anti-juridical multiplicity of meaning.

In the Memorable Fancy scene, the Angel sees the void and then the abyss as spaces of terror, while the speaker sees them as spaces of possibility for creation and imagination.⁹ The human speaker, who is bounded to the earth, is free because the speaker has Vision; in contrast, the free-floating Angel is shackled because the Angel has no ability to transcend Enlightenment mandates about how knowledge is gained and how reality is formed. For Blake, repressing one's own Vision is "even more oppressive than enforced obedience to a tyrannical government" (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 274). As

⁹ The speaker's ability to use Vision in a productive way is reminiscent of Leibniz's statement in *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* that "'there always remain in the abyss of things slumbering parts which have yet to be awakened, to grow in size and worth, and in a word, to advance to a more perfect state. And hence no end of progress is ever reached'" (quoted in Bronner 21). See also Matthew J. A. Green's fascinating comments on the possibility for progress in the Derridean aporia in *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake* (50).

the Memorable Fancy scene describes, the “freedom to imagine is the power to create the world, and [for Blake] that power is human rather than divine” (Makdisi 267).

Regenerating *Urizen*

The [First] Book of Urizen is a rich design through which to consider how Blakean Vision and the exemptive sublime invoke the possibility of justice because at its very core, *Urizen* is about regenerating multiplicity of meaning in direct opposition to the Logos, or, in Urizenic terms, “One King, one God, one Law” (4:40, E72). The narrative that unfolds in *Urizen*, the material text itself, and the approach to reading it are all characterized by lawlessness, and, specifically, the lawlessness of rejecting Enlightenment epistemological and ontological discourse that privilege empiricism, ocular sight, and binary structures. Thematically, the design is a rewriting of the creation myth set forth in Genesis, and, thus, is insubordinate in its multiplicity according to the logocentric, tyrannical thinking that accompanies single vision. It is a story about the Fall of Urizen, who is both slave to and author of written laws and single vision. Multiplicity of meaning also arises via the material text (via Blake’s ontological aesthetics), as inconsistencies between the verbal and visual designs prompt readers to employ Vision and experience the freedom of the exemptive sublime or be enslaved by single vision and orthodox interpretation.

In the verbal design of one of the last plates of *Urizen*, the speaker, who is unknown—and, perhaps with Blakean poetic justice, unknowable—tells the reader the fates of Urizen, Enitharmon, and Los.¹⁰ The speaker states:

3. Six days they shrunk up from existence
And on the seventh day they rested
And they bless'd the seventh day, in sick hope:
And forgot their eternal life
4. And their thirty cities divided
In form of a human heart
No more could they rise at will
In the infinite void, but bound down
To earth by their narrowing perceptions (25:39-47, E83)

As he does throughout the poem, in these lines Blake regenerates Enlightenment epistemological and ontological discourse so that spaces of void are liberating and productive and matters of the heart are public and communal. While terms such as “infinite void” often conjure sublime images of terror in eighteenth-century discourse, in this passage the phrase seems to indicate a desirable space of emancipation. Further, throughout the poem, it is the Eternals who are juxtaposed against Urizen, Enitharmon, and Los and who are, given their appellation, assumed to have immortality, yet in the lines above it is implied that Urizen, Enitharmon, and Los at one time had eternal life. Also adding to the complication of these lines is that usually there is an associative disconnect between the notion of a heart—a solitary, internal, human organ—and the idea

¹⁰ While I read the “they” in the lines below as these three characters, I do so cognizant of the fact that this conclusion is open for debate, and, once again, perhaps unknowable.

of a city—a multivocal, public, discursive space—yet in the lines above these two words seem inexorably entwined.

There are multiple experiences of productive regeneration and illumination that occur in darkness and chaos in *Urizen*, and most strikingly in the work's opening plates, in which the larger creative theory of the work is unfolded. In the biblical Genesis, the ability to create ontological and creative presence resides solely vis-à-vis the Word animated at a precise moment by and as a radiant God; in *Urizen*, meaning is created beyond the limitations of logocentric and chronologic systems. *Urizen*'s genesis mirrors Blake's radically different understanding of creation (both physical and aesthetic) and demonstrates the way in which Blake's aesthetics are grounded in an ontological process that privileges shifting relations and process rather than enclosure and fixidity. Steven Vine describes *Urizen*'s genesis as having no identifiable beginning and *Urizen* himself as “a process and principle of repetition” (“Framing Los(s)” 120). Hélène Ibata notes that for Blake “execution could not be divided from invention” (37), as the imaginative process and the physical representation of that process were one in the same.

Although Blake found the system of language inadequate and oppressive—he analogized the English language to a “rough basement” (*Jerusalem* 36:58, E183) and declared the system of language to be a “stubborn structure” (*Jerusalem* 36:59, E183)—he of course did not abandon the system. Rather than attempting to transcend or escape from language, Blake rebuilds it and celebrates the possibilities that flow from its reconstituted structure. Assigning ontological potency to “swift winged words” (*Urizen*, 2:6, E70), Blake journeys deeper into language and “Striv[es] with Systems to deliver

Individuals from those Systems” (*Jerusalem* 11:5, E154). Blake’s reader, in turn, is offered a space in which he or she can reconstruct his or her understanding at liberty in the exemptive sublime.

One of the primary ways in which Blake accomplishes this reorganization of meaning in *Urizen* is to subvert traditional Enlightenment epistemological discourses of light, progression, and knowledge, thus requiring his readers to break open their “mind-forg’d manacles” and assumptions to experience the freedom of nontyrannical Vision. Although Vision is a way of approaching the world and not an aesthetic category, Vision bears significant resonances with sensibility. Blake co-opts some of the signposts of the literature of sensibility—such as enthusiasm,¹¹ pity,¹² and mercy—into his articulation of Vision. Further, just as Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin place intersubjective empathy and equitable communal justice at the heart of their radical sensibility, Blake is explicit in his belief that those who look at the world with a vegetative eye have no Vision and thus no empathy. As Thomas R. Frosch explains, when seeing with Blakean Vision, “seeing becomes total knowledge, and there is no longer any disparity between the visible and the demands of feeling” (127).

Similarly, the Blakean exemptive sublime shares some attributes with the predominant contemporary articulations of the aesthetic category of the sublime offered by Burke and Kant, but ultimately suggests an experience that is radically different. Like

¹¹ For a discussion of the role of enthusiasm in eighteenth-century and Romantic-era literature, see Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, especially part I.

¹² Barker-Benfield has noted that pity had a “shrine” in the literature of sensibility (265).

the theories of the sublime set forth by Burke and Kant, in the Blakean exemptive sublime there is a relational existence between the reader and exterior objects. However, unlike the Burkean and Kantian articulations, for Blake there is no requirement in the exemptive sublime for defining elements such as terror, obscurity, nearness, distance, limitations, or the powerful intervention of reason. The Burkean and Kantian sublimines are founded on the triumph of reason and present the human mind as a passive organ of colonizing, empirical stimuli. Hélène Ibata explains how Blake found “imaginative failure” (34) and “intellectual torpor” (33), not inspiration, in a person’s sense of powerlessness and domination.¹³ Indeed, the Blakean exemptive sublime does not arise from the sense of an *end*, but from the sense of the space of interpretive process characterized by multiplicity and non-teleological orientation. Because of its emphasis on interpretive freedom and multiplicity, the exemptive sublime is in direct opposition to prescriptive Enlightenment epistemological and ontological discourse that equates light with progress, virtue, and knowledge and darkness with stagnation, immorality, and ignorance, and that suggests that spaces of void are unproductive and infertile.

Much like my articulation of the Blakean exemptive sublime, Mark L. Barr has described Blake’s reader as possessing “interpretive emancipation” and “interpretive freedom” (373). Noting how Blake’s exceptionally difficult texts generate a positive space of exemption, Barr states that the

¹³ Ibata also argues that Blake saw vastness and darkness as “evidence of mental dissolution and loss” (34). As I discuss below, I firmly disagree with this specific reading, although I find Ibata’s larger theory of Blake’s theory of the sublime helpful.

gap between word and image, supported by the contradictory, fragmented and unconventional nature of Blake's thought and representation, creates interpretive freedom that culminates in the removal of the author himself, a final catalyst that annihilates any fixed point of ideological reference—without Blake as author, the single voice becomes fragmented into a multitude of possibilities. (373)

Indeed, unlike Vincent De Luca's assertion in *Words of Eternity* that it is the reader's act of self-annihilation that must be accomplished for Blakean sublimity to occur (43), I argue that the Blakean exemptive sublime demands no prescriptive act just as it compels no interpretive mandate.¹⁴ This freedom is Blake's Vision, which is at liberty from conventional figurations of binary Enlightenment tropes (such as darkness versus light, and spaces of void versus spaces of fertility). The Blakean exemptive sublime does not enact the paradigmatic transport inherent in the notions of the sublime that begin with Longinus because the exemptive sublime does not convey the reader somewhere *else*; rather, in Blake's ontological aesthetics, the exemptive sublime emphasizes the process of becoming. By focusing on the process of interpretive multiplicity rather than on the product of a single message, Blake's texts gesture toward a practice of reading that provides for ethical reflection about the validity of hegemonic demands.¹⁵ The necessity

¹⁴ While I disagree with De Luca's analysis of the Blakean reader's self-annihilation, I find helpful his understanding of the Blakean text itself as sublime object (6), as well as his reading of the sublime as a field rather than as a "single conceptual entity capable of succinct definition" (4).

¹⁵ Writing about *The Book of Thel*, W. J. T. Mitchell has suggested that the multiple and contradictory interpretations of the poem indicate that "[t]he effect of [Blake's] strategy is to undercut any attempt by the reader to pass judgment on Thel from some fixed

for “seeing” with Blakean nontyrannical Vision confronts *Urizen*’s reader from the first plate of the design.

Plate one, the visual design that opens *The [First] Book of Urizen*, immediately interrogates whether the reader has “Single vision” or manifold Vision, and may be seen as challenging the oppressive use of language by orthodox religious figures.



Figure 3: *The First Book of Urizen*, Plate 1, Bentley Copy C (1794) (Yale Center for British Art)

perspective” (80), and that “Blake is trying to subvert this sort of univocal judgment, and to confront us with a human dilemma that eludes any fixed moral stance” (81).

That the elderly, Moses-like figure is writing on seemingly stone tablets with both hands and with eyes closed suggests that he is furiously inscribing restrictive laws in a blind manner, in an unenlightened way. For Blake, this kind of passive reception and promulgation of unexamined commandments is the embodiment of “Newton’s sleep.”¹⁶ Similarly, that this figure sits upon a large, imposing, and open book indicates that he is quite literally rooted in and tangled by the interpretive laws that he inscribes, an indication made more apparent by the actual roots growing from the book downwards into the ground. Dark colors surround the man and the upright tablets, which also resemble tomb stones, while light colors and an open space high above the figure imply that the man is a prisoner of his own creation made in the darkness of incomprehension.

However, other interpretations for this visual design prompt the reader to question whether it is darkness or light that is analogous to enlightenment. For example, the gray, stone-like tablets also carry positive connotations. These objects seem to emanate from the figure himself and form the pattern of wings, granting an angelic or divine quality to the figure. These objects may also be understood as doorways, twin entries that intimate that the figure has some kind of choice in his destination and destiny. Returning to the divine nature of the figure, the fact that his eyes are closed and his hands are outstretched to write may indicate that he is a material, human enactment of “swift winged words.”

¹⁶ Gilpin has offered similar descriptions of this scene, commenting that Urizen is “blindly scribbling out laws,” and, in his “self-absorbed theorizing,” Urizen is so obsessed “with his own creations, he uses both hands to write” (40). Gilpin also likens the stone tablets to tombstones, and notes that the tablets are reminiscent of the commandments God gave to Moses (40).

He may be read as a person who is creating his own emancipated reality by engaging all of his senses rather than condemning himself to “Single vision & Newton’s sleep.”

David Erdman has commented on the way in which this plate may be read as a scene of potential liberation when, in *Illuminated Blake*, Erdman suggests that the patches of blue sky in the design invite the reader to question and test the absurdity of mechanically written laws and the existence of such tyrannical power (183).

The reader’s ability to reimagine knowledge-making has significant political, juridical, and historical implications. Cooper has commented that “by undermining readers’ conventional epic-realist expectations of a stable, self-reinforcing narrative of representations” in *Urizen*, Blake also “call[s] into question other, more oppressive discursive conventions associated with *Urizen*—most especially, the circular Blackstonian claim to speak ‘on behalf of’ the Law . . .” (194). Explicating his juridical theory in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), William Blackstone holds that the law is permanent, uniform, and universal, and is founded upon an unwavering mode of legal textual construction that privileges entrenched social custom (or common law) and parliamentary enactments.¹⁷ The piety with which Blackstone regards written law

¹⁷ Blackstone defines municipal law as “a rule of civil conduct prescribed by the supreme power in a state, commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong” (44). He claims that the determining properties of a law (or rule) are permanence, uniformity, and universality (44). Distinguishing between law and advise or counsel, Blackstone explains that “our obedience to the *law* depends not upon *our approbation*, but upon the *maker’s will*. Counsel is only matter of persuasion, law is matter of injunction; counsel acts only upon the willing, law upon the unwilling also” (44).

and social custom is antithetically opposed to Blake's belief that "All Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder" (E618).

Blake's statement that to curtail transgressive imaginative Vision is to end, or "murder," ontological existence is not metaphorical. Reminiscent of the way Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin rewrite sensibility so that egalitarian justice is linked with empathy, for Blake there is a direct relationship between Vision, empathy, and freedom. Jon Mee has discussed Blake's notion of liberation by using some of the language of sensibility, stating that "moral sentiments [could not] be abstracted from the excitability of the physiological being for Blake. It was only by negotiating the minute particularities of the 'passions & senses' that the possibilities of human emancipation are to be written" ("Bloody Blake" 79-80). In "The Divine Image" (*Songs of Innocence*, 1789), Blake locates "Mercy Pity Peace and Love" (1, E12) in the "human form divine" (11, E13), transferring the guiding principles underlying the literature of sensibility from a representational, aesthetic category and onto a communal, corporeal agent:

And all must love the human form.
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too. (17-20, E13)

This animated, human Vision relies on multiple senses that are driven by emotional response to reject singular meanings. Differentiating Blake's notion of emancipated and emancipating Vision, Makdisi notes that Blake placed the struggle for liberty in the 1790s "beyond the strictly political-representational issues raised in the writings of activists like Paine, to challenge not only the forms of identity taken for granted by Paine, but also the

radical faith in the law and competition” (8).¹⁸ Blakean enthusiastic Vision rejects the mandated logocentricism of Blackstonian¹⁹ and Enlightenment²⁰ epistemological models. To approach a text with multiple Vision is to engage it with an enthusiastic openness to the multiplicity of reconstituted meaning, to approach the Blakean text in a way that mirrors the material, multiple form of the text itself.²¹

In his short, two-stanza poem “How to know Love from Deceit,” Blake writes of the relationship between lawlessness, empathy, and liberation. The poem speaks of

¹⁸ Similarly, Jon Mee describes how radicals like John Thelwall held out the progressive movement as “above all else a product of Enlightenment rationality” (“Anxieties of Enthusiasm” 186).

¹⁹ Barr characterizes Blake’s aesthetics as being focused on “the ways in which radical artistic expression resists judicial institutions” (371). In “Practicing Resistance,” Barr argues that some of Blake’s designs, most notably *Milton*, evince a “poetic method attack against earthly institutions, a ‘mercy’ achieved through the ‘self annihilation’ of textual indeterminacy, seeks to revive the spirit of jury resistance to legal authority” (376). Barr’s observation is particularly illuminating in the context of my discussion above about how Wollstonecraft uses sensibility and the sublime to argue for jury nullification and a kind of proto civil disobedience.

²⁰ Denise Gigante notes that “Blake made it clear that to rely, like Enlightenment scientists, on the characteristics of visible structure is to fail to recognize the essential nature of living form” (465).

²¹ Makdisi makes a direct connection between enthusiasm and multiplicity. He explains that by the late 1800s, the term “enthusiasm” bore connotations that “threatened the sanctity, the stability, the sovereign imperviousness of the unitary subject, just as it threatened the sanctity of private property and the political norms and orders of the state” (*Impossible History* 296).

empathetic love and juridical and mental emancipation in ways that resonate with Blake's notion of inspired Vision:

Love to faults is always blind
 Always is to joy inclind
 Lawless wingd & unconfind
 And breaks all chains from every mind

Deceit to secreesy confind
 Lawful cautious & refind
 To every thing but interest blind
 And forges fetters for the mind (E472)

Blake locates the source of communal equitable justice as well as mental liberation not in legal mandates but in love that is "Lawless wingd & unconfind." Although Blake is explicit that this freedom has very real political implications, this freedom is intricately tied to his revolutionizing aesthetic categories, namely, to the way Blake creates a space for the reader in which meaning is a process of non-teleological, anti-hegemonic lawlessness. In this space, contraries and multiplicity are (re)generative and not arresting or impotent, and the reader with Vision will welcome the space of undecidability.

For example, the reader's initial disorientation about whether the first plate of *Urizen* announces a hopeful space of emancipation or a foreboding tale of subjugation is exacerbated by the Preludium of plate two, which appears to embody a clash between pictorial design and written text.



Figure 4: *The First Book of Urizen*,
Plate 2, Bentley Copy C (1794) (Yale Center for British Art)

The visual text boasts bright colors of pink and light green and depicts an angelic figure floating through the air contentedly and gently leading a small child above a flame-like pattern. In *Blake's Composite Art*, Mitchell explains the figure as a “guardian angel” who is a “humanized, moderated version of the more violent energy forms beneath her,” and associates the child as one of Blake’s cherub figures (144). Emphasizing the connectedness and harmony between life forms, the Preludium contains the only pictorial design in *Urizen* in which humans make positive contact (111). This contact may be read as a visual design of Blake’s concept of divine, *human* freedom, in which “form can

become liberating rather than confining” and “our ontological power can be freed, and directed by love rather than the law” (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 282).²² Just as Vision (or, “Mercy Pity Peace and Love”) is located in “the human form divine,” so too is the human (reading) body the source of sublimity for Blake. Ibata notes that an individual “Selfhood” cannot experience the sublime in isolation; rather, “reunited with the imagination and expanded by Man’s creative energies, the body itself becomes the locus of visionary activity” (35).

The reader’s “visionary activity” of reorganizing meaning continues as, contrary to the visual design, the verbal design explicitly speaks of a place that is isolated and suggests that a “dark vision of torment” will be revealed:

Of the primeval Priests assum’d power,
When Eternals spurn’d back his religion;
And gave him a place in the north,
Obscure, shadowy, void, solitary.

Eternals I hear your call gladly,
Dictate swift winged words, & fear not
To unfold your dark visions of torment. (2:1-7, E70)

Despite ominous introductory promises, a close reading of the Preludium demonstrates that the reader may in fact locate within the written text of this plate something other than desolation and desperation. This seeming incongruity epitomizes what Blake will say within the text of *Urizen* about a human’s ability not just to see, but to exercise Vision.

²² Jeanne Moskal has noted that “Blake came to view forgiveness as a new dispensation, along the lines of an ethics of virtue, almost achieving an independent conceptual status, written successfully ‘without’ the dispensation of law” (12).

Indeed, the disorientation that results from challenging traditional modes of perception and understanding may be initially confusing, but certainly need not end with the reader having been led astray and lost; rather, it is the state of disorientation that eventually leads the reader to a place of possibility, a place in which strict adherence to interpretive dictates about how one sees is not necessary. In addition to being a rejection of the Enlightenment's privileging of illuminated reason as the most potent way to "see," Blake's reorganization of the discourse of dark and void spaces (in which for Blake one is able to see with Vision) is also a rewriting of the Burkean sublime.

Highlighting the differences between Blake's rewritten sublime and the prevailing, contemporary British theory of the sublime, the verbal design of *Urizen's* plate two contains conventional vocabulary of the Burkean sublime; however, the associations that arise from this vocabulary are not necessarily negative ones in Blake's text. The second line states that the Eternals "spurn'd back his religion." While the "his" of this clause is not identified through the use of a proper noun, the reader assumes that the "his" refers to Urizen. While "spurn'd" has a negative connotation, Blake counters this connotation with the idea of the creation of an open space, albeit one that is "Obscure, shadowy, void, and solitary." Traditionally, "obscure" connotes unformed, "shadowy" connotes immateriality of being, "void" connotes barrenness, and "solitary" connotes isolation. However, the "I" of the Preludium hears the call of the Eternals "gladly," and beckons them to deliver "swift winged words, & fear not / To unfold your dark visions of torment." Just as Blake recasts an immaterial, mental conception—religion—as a noun possessing actual materiality capable of being pushed back and

moved, words are similarly given physicality and become “winged.” The materiality of language embodied as winged beings is further underscored by Erdman’s notation in *Illuminated Blake* that a winged fly and a butterfly with spotted wings reside around some of the letters making up the word “Urizen” (184).

The inversion of material and mental constructs mirrors Blake’s deconstruction of traditional conclusions about whether there can be ontological or epistemological progress in a space of void and darkness. This inversion also exemplifies the way Blake’s readers can erect their own notions in the deconstructed—and liberated—space of the exemptive sublime. By removing restrictive interpretive codes and mandates and opening the limits that traditionally demarcate meaning, Blake offers his readers the ability to challenge such codes, mandates, and limits by engaging in the imaginative process of creating their own meanings and, thus, their own reality. Rather than forcing an end to the interpretive process, Blake’s aesthetics emphasize the process itself; while Enlightenment theorists of the sublime, such as Burke and Kant, articulate a sublime founded on limitation and overpowering interventions of cognitive functions, Blake’s sublimity is characterized by openings, by what Ibata describes as “a new kind of sublimity as process” (32). Similarly, Vine characterizes the Blakean sublime as “enact[ing] an aesthetics of incompleteness, process and becoming whose open-endedness . . . exceeds the formal closures of the illuminated book” (256).

If we consider the Blakean exemptive sublime as characterized by the liberty to reconstruct meaning in direct opposition to the Logos—or, in Urizenic terms, “One King, one God, one Law (4:40, E72)—and as constituted by the possibilities that arise from the

openness of becoming, it is not a far stretch to see how there is an ontological component to Blakean aesthetics: Vision and the imaginative power to create does not stop with an artistic endeavor for Blake; rather, Vision *is* “the power to create the world, and here that power is human rather than divine (or rather such divine power is here recognized as inherently human...)” (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 267). Makdisi vehemently argues against the conclusion that this linking of imaginative power and materialist productive power is inherently idealist. On the contrary, rather than lifting Blakean aesthetics out of considerations of materialist production, these aesthetics announce “a kind of ontological materialism” in which “the powers of conception and execution” are inseparable (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 268). By subverting the power of Logos and offering the reader “interpretive emancipation” (Barr 373), the Blakean exemptive sublime offers a space of reconstituted meaning, materialist relevancy, and ontological potency. To reach this space, however, the reader must use multiple Vision and not single vision.

For example, in plate two of *Urizen*, the reader is confronted with the apparent paradox that shadows in the text exist in a space of void and darkness (Urizen is given “a place in the north, / Obscure, shadowy, void, solitary” (2:3-4, E70)). If a reader were to approach this plate with deadened, single vision, these lines from the verbal design would yield an image of ungenerative, unproductive, desolate darkness. This image, however, would be in sharp contrast to the brightly colored, sun-drenched visual design, which depicts a loving, intimate connection between two dynamic figures (as discussed above). Indeed, a reader with Vision understands that because shadows cannot exist without light, Urizen’s “place in the north” cannot be “void” and “solitary” as these words are literally

denoted, as the sun necessarily provides light and, thus, life, or at the very least the possibility for life. As Christine Gallant notes in *Blake and the Assimilation of Chaos*, the state of void is inexorably tied not to *nonbeing*, but rather to existence. Gallant explains that it is in the state of void from which the cosmos, and thus all life, is to be formed. The Preludium's urging to the Eternals that they "fear not / To unfold your dark visions of torment" (2:6-7, E70) is curious in that the unidentified speaker seems to understand that there is something redeeming or at least cathartic about releasing the "dark visions," that there is an existing life force, shadowy though it may be, in the darkness. Gallant observes that "Blake does not mean to suggest that the 'void' is in itself fearsome and destructive, but only that it seems so to those who would change it" (18). Those who would change Blake's void are those readers who "see" only with single, uninspired vision, and, thus, are unable to recognize the space for productive and generative meaning in Blake's void.

It is not only some of Blake's readers who lack Vision, though; indeed, most of the characters who populate *Urizen* are unable to experience the liberation of the Blakean sublime. The destructive flaw for *Urizen*'s characters, Gallant explains, is that they attempt to transcend or escape chaos, and that this, Blake makes clear, is their fatal error (15). Paul Mann makes a similar point when he notes that "[i]t was Urizen's very desire to 'transcend' Eternity that generated the fallen world. In Blake's text in general, most attempts at transcendental projects are doomed to failure" (64). Indeed, far before Urizen inscribes laws and attempts to forge "a solid without fluctuation" (4:11, E71), it is the Eternals who are repelled by spaces of void and darkness, and who attempt to separate

themselves from what they view as the chaotic nature of the void. When Urizen is first named, in plate three, it is intimated that he is responsible for the “abominable void” that is so threatening to the Eternals:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
 In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
 Self-closd, all-repelling: what Demon
 Hath form'd this abominable void
 This soul-shudd'ring vacuum?—Some said
 “It is Urizen”, But unknown, abstracted
 Brooding secret, the dark power hid. (3:1-7, E70)

Urizen is initially identified as a shadow that has penetrated the realm of Eternity and is folded in on itself. What seems to be so “abominable” and “soul-shudd'ring” to the Eternals is the independence and singularity of the shadow. However, the Urizenic shadow is also conflated with a space of “void” and a “vacuum”: did the Urizenic shadow form the “abominable void” and “soul-shudd'ring vacuum,” or are these spaces actually Urizen? Either reading suggests that Urizen is, in fact, not “unprolific,” for whether he occupies the space of a shadow or a void, both spaces are productive and vital. The Blakean shadow is in fact quite animated. As Damon explains, for Blake the figure of the Shadow is “the residue of one’s suppressed desires” (368). Indeed, the visual design of plate three depicts a body outstretched, running yet oddly static, engulfed in the heat of flames.



Figure 5: *The First Book of Urizen*, Plate 3, Bentley Copy C (1794) (Yale Center for British Art)

Notably, the body's face is turned in a gesture of hiding, which may indicate the figure's state of shame.²³

²³ Mitchell offers interesting and various readings of this plate, such as seeing the running figure as a warning that we have been left to our own devices to navigate through the “flames of desire,” or seeing the figure as an image of inspiration. Mitchell also notes that the figure may represent one of the Eternals (145).

Although some scholars have read connotations of the Urizenic shadow and places of void as negative throughout *Urizen*, I counter that these readings have fallen into what Andrew M. Cooper identifies as “the Urizenic trap.” Noting that it is “striking” how *Urizen*’s critics continue to fall into this trap, he observes that critics

tend to flatten that poem’s vertiginous Vortex of coming-to-know into a solid globe, as if they somehow knew Urizen a priori without needing to undergo the disturbing reversals enacted by Blake’s narrative. All too compatibly with Urizen’s idea of himself, they portray him as a truly hegemonic power. And yet, the poem demonstrates that this divorcing of knowledge from experience and agency is what generates the Urizenic illusion of becoming what you behold in the first place. (191)

For example, Tristanne J. Connolly states that while creation is supposed to connote coming into being, in *Urizen* creation is a step closer to nonexistence (80). However, Connolly’s observation does not acknowledge that in *Urizen*, a state of void may be terrifying to the Eternals, but it is actually a place of gestation and not dissipation. Further, this reading suggests that Blake is operating within what the poet himself calls the “rough basement” and “stubborn structure” of English language, which, I argue, is a system that Blake challenges in *Urizen*. Indeed, Erdman comments on the reproductive quality of the Urizenic abyss when he describes this space as “a womb for Urizen to grow in” (*Illuminated Blake*, 190). While the “shadow of horror” may evoke revulsion on the part of the Eternals, in *Urizen* this figure does not signify absence, but rather a space of opportunity, albeit squandered, for the contraries of reason (Urizen) and imagination (Los). Similarly, writing about spaces of void, Kathleen Lundeen describes the void as “lifeless” and “a kind of unproductive womb” (70). As an example for this argument,

Lundeen notes that in the Preludium Urizen is exiled to a void. However, this place of exile is in the North and is a place in which no religion is imposed. In Blake's language, the North represents the imagination (Damon 301); imagination, in turn, is represented by Blake as "the central faculty of both God and Man," as the "Divine-Humanity," as existence, and as eternity (Damon 195).²⁴ Further, in this place religion has been "spurn'd back," providing an open place of possibility for imagination to flourish without being subject to and bound by the imposition of "One King, one God, one Law."

The interpretive open field continues on plate three when we consider how Urizen himself is a shifting space of associative, biographical, and even ontological indeterminacy. Urizen is commonly understood as bearing a negative association, as his name—phonetically identical to the phrase "your reason"—indicates that he is the embodiment of Blakean debilitating reason.²⁵ In addition, Urizen performs an ontological, materialist enactment of this aesthetic naming by laboring hard to limit, regulate, categorize, codify, define, and control what surrounds him. One of the most striking confessions that epitomizes these labors is contained in the lines "I have sought for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation" (4:10-11, E71). However, who is

²⁴ Vincent De Luca reads the Blakean North more ambiguously, stating that Blake's representation of the North varies throughout his career, "sometimes appearing as the focal scene of whatever is barren and unregenerate, and sometimes as the preserve of original powers of culture and creativity" (192). Applying this insight to Urizen, De Luca characterizes Urizen's northern locale as a place of "dismal catastrophe" (194).

²⁵ S. Foster Damon notes that Urizen "symbolizes Reason" and the negative attributes Blake associates with this faculty, such as "the limiter of Energy, the lawmaker, and the avenging conscience" (419).

“I”? Most readers take this to be Urizen himself, and such a reading certainly squares with the poem. But the indeterminacy of the “I” should not be overlooked, particularly as there are moments in the poem when Los (or Imagination, and the associative contrary to Urizen),²⁶ who is terrified at Urizen’s “formless unmeasurable death” (7:9, E74), “formed nets & gins / And threw the nets round about” (8:7-8, E74), and “bound every change [of Urizen] / With rivets of iron & brass” (8:10-11, E74).

Writing of the way in which identities and associations shift in *Urizen*, Vine states that “Blake’s poetic naming of Urizen . . . can be seen as a staging of indeterminacy, for it sets up Urizen’s meaning as a question rather than as a knowable content,” and that *Urizen* “disallows any readerly attempt to regard Urizen as simply the allegorical representative of—in Blakean terms—a debased Enlightenment rationality (“Framing Los(s)” 119).²⁷ Similarly, Jon Mee explains that he initially regarded Urizen “in terms of the kind of feudal-patriarchal blockage of circulation,” but that he realized he was “wrong to imagine that what is going on in *The Book of Urizen* could be reduced to an opposition of tyrannical blockage and radical circulation” (76). Indeed, rather than embodying blockage, before he is bound into human form, “Urizen is a clod of clay” (6:10, E74). Although the Eternals read this state of existence as “Death,” the clod of clay may also be read as an open, unrestricted field of interpretive freedom that parallels the space of the exemptive sublime. Further, given that *Urizen* is a recasting of the Book of Genesis, the

²⁶ Damon identifies Los as “Poetry, the expression in this world of the Creative Imagination” (246).

²⁷ Makdisi, writing about the abundance of confinement in *Urizen*, states that Urizen is “as much a victim as a villain” in “the organization of life” (*Impossible History* 269).

clay may also be read as the potential for Adam to reform not just his physical body but his ability to see through Vision.

Interpretive freedom also stems from the fact that while we know the consequences of Urizen's break from the realm of the Eternals, there remains significant indeterminacy concerning why, in the first instance, Urizen is divided. While there is not a definitive answer within the timeline of the textual story itself, one possibility emerges not from Urizen's actions once he is fallen, but from the *reactions* of the Eternals to their shadow self. Although it is Urizen who is continually described as self-closed and unknown, it is the Eternals who desperately wish to remain self-closed and unknowing. In plate three, Urizen is described as

Dark revolving in silent activity:
Unseen in tormenting passions;
An activity unknown and horrible;
A self-contemplating shadow,
In enormous labours occupied. (3:18-22, E71)

As noted above, "shadow" in the Blakean system represents delusion, but it also represents the residue of suppressed desires (Damon 368). That Urizen was given a place in the North suggests that the Urizenic energy or desire, the "tormenting passions," became too great to remain within the realm of the Eternals. The visual design of plate 3 (see above) similarly emphasizes burning desire as flames surround an outstretched figure. Indeed, what is so threatening to the Eternals is not merely that the shadow of repressed desire has returned, but that it is "self-contemplating." The ability to know oneself is lacking in the Eternals, who react with trepidation and powerlessness when

called upon to integrate their shadow selves, that is, their desires. Later in the poem, the Eternals actually flee from the more humanized, evolved vision of the first separated female form, Enitharmon, and order Enitharmon and Los to be hidden. The Eternals command: “‘Spread a Tent, with strong curtains around them / ‘Let cords & stakes bind in the Void / That Eternals may no more behold them’” (19:2-4, E78).

The Eternals’ refusal to understand their desire by covering their sight is strikingly enacted in the visual design of plate 17, in which a male form literally shields his view and is unable to see the female form before him.



Figure 6: *The First Book of Urizen*,
 Plate 17, Bentley Copy C (1794) (Yale Center for British Art)

That the forms have taken on an identifiably human appearance may indicate that the inability of the Eternals to practice Vision has been, tragically, reenacted by the humans, who will suffer the same fracture that led to Urizen's separation from the Eternals. Similarly, the physical space separating the female (whom I read as Enitharmon) and male (whom I read as Los) forms demonstrates that humans have lost not just the ability to see with desire and Vision, but to engage in any kind of communal "self" structure. The "Mercy, Love & Pity" that is at the heart of communal identity, as well as at the center of the material form of Blake's texts, has been lost on *Urizen's* human forms. The plate enacts how for Blake, aesthetics and ontology cannot be divided: Blake's aesthetics and his Vision of humanity are based on ontological constitutive multiplicity.

In *Urizen*, Blake's fallen forms (Urizen, Enitharmon, Los, and their progeny) are single forms who are not only ontologically divided from others in a physical sense—indeed Urizen appears to have come into existence by being rent from Los—but also in their inability to use their imaginative power of Vision and sensual powers of desire to liberate themselves from their tortured, singular existences. In *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, Makdisi explains the relationship between being and desire in Blakean identity construction and aesthetics by noting that both in Blake's conception of being and in his art "we are not fixed in definite (and intermeasurable) forms, as unitary, self-contained, and self-regulating individuals; indeed, we do not exist as definite forms at all, but rather as ever-changing bundles of relations articulated by our infinite desires" (*Impossible History* 7). Makdisi notes Blake understood selfhood in a way that was opposed to the hegemonic narrative of negative freedom and individual

selfhood that epitomizes the liberal tradition and that was consolidated in the radical movement of the 1790s (2). For Blake the sovereign individual “represented the worst form of confinement and restriction” (5). He regarded selves and others as existing “in a dispersed and mutually dependent network that is not really compatible with a discourse of identity and difference” (6). This idea of the individual as network and field is also enacted in Blakean texts, which may be characterized by “a series of links and synapses in which selves and others are shown to be made up of common and shared elements, and in which meanings are generated imminently rather than by reference to transcendent and transparent or “self-evident” truths” (6). Blakean Vision imagines—and produces—an individual as unsealed and unbounded, and this “dispersed network” is also embodied in the content, form, and materiality of Blake’s texts (Makdisi 7).

Just as Williams, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin rewrite sensibility and the sublime with an egalitarian ethos, there is a strong undercurrent of egalitarianism in Blakean Vision and the exemptive sublime. Blake locates the ability to see with Vision, and, thus, to experience the exemptive sublime, in the “human form divine.” This ability is available to all regardless of social class, gender, or race, although it is afforded only to those who engage all of their senses and disengage from the tyranny of single vision. In *Urizen*, inspired Vision bears an ontological potency as it becomes not just favored, but necessary for existence. Darkness and void become so deadly in *Urizen* because of the inability of the Urizenic forces to awaken to the “peculiar Light” of divine Vision; these forces remain unknown, unknowing, and petrified within the shadow of the possibility of coming into themselves. Blake’s visual designs make it strikingly clear that “division”

does not mean “separation” if one is looking at an object—including a text—with Vision. We can better understand Blake’s conception of division by likening this term to his notion of the state that is created by contraries; this state is progressive and does not enact a nullification. Contraries do not cancel each other out; rather, contraries create a space of mutability and an energy of possibility and, ultimately, can open the exemptive sublime.²⁸

Blake’s visual designs emphasize the positive and energetic aspects of the division—of the contraries—of part and whole. In “Visionary Syntax: Nontyrannical Coherence in Blake’s Visual Art,” Carr explains how in his pictorial representation of human and human-like forms, Blake employs a linear style to achieve the unification of part and whole without the former being subsumed by the latter and without forcing a “tyrannical organization” in his plates:

Lines and outlines set boundaries and establish limits; but they also bound or leap, moving over the page in exuberant bursts of energy. Blake’s “bounding line” defines a unified whole while it accommodates the “peculiar Light” of individual parts. It binds minute details into a coherent form without grinding down their unique features as more mechanically regular styles do. (227)

For example, note how in figure six above, the bounding lines are so precise that large regions of the bodies are emphasized (for example, the female’s thigh) just as clearly as the “Minute Particulars” of thousands of black lines pushing through the copper color and

²⁸ Andrew M. Cooper has commented on the way in which *Urizen* asks readers to consider “a potentially liberating remarriage of the Contraries” (189).

creating a “peculiar Light” in front of the female figure.²⁹ In the male figure, we see the detail of the latissimus dorsi muscle with the same ease with which we notice single strands of his hair. We recognize the particulars of the gluteal muscles and the entire bottom region of the male almost simultaneously. The bounding lines are stunning in their individual clarity, yet each is absolutely necessary to establish the unity of the whole image. The visual design as an intact entity is established by the unification without assimilation of the bounding lines. Blake’s bounding lines are at once supremely individual and necessarily communal; they produce the whole of the representation and yet they are liberated in their singularity and potentiality.

Just as Blake’s bounding lines are a critical example of his ontological aesthetics, they also demonstrate how aesthetics can open the possibility of nontyrannical space.³⁰ Iyata offers an analysis of the Blake’s bounding line as embodying a gesture or process rather than a finite closure. She explains that the line “may perhaps be best understood as an attempt to give form without actually binding, an expressive play rather than an authoritative delimitation, in which the dynamic and expressive gesture of the artist overrides the concern of adequacy between imagined form and represented outline” (45).

²⁹ Blake uses the terms “Minute Particulars” and “peculiar light” in *Jerusalem*, as I discuss below.

³⁰ Frosch has made a connection between Blake’s use of outline and his break with traditional eighteenth-century articulations of the sublime. Frosch notes that Blake’s insistence on producing “sharply discriminated forms” in his visual designs is a rejection of “the spacious in the deliberately vague, the infinite in the boundless” underlying contemporary articulations of the sublime (128).

“To bound,” of course, carries associations of both restriction and emancipation, and whether one sees with multiple Vision or single vision will shape the interpretation of meaning in Blake’s texts. In *Jerusalem*, Blake states, “so he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole / Must see it in its Minute Particulars” (91:20-21, E251), and that, “In Great Eternity, every particular Form gives forth or Emanates / Its own peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision / And the Light is his Garment” (54:1-3, E203). It is by employing this nonempirical, reconstituted “peculiar Light” of Blakean Vision that the reader experiences the exemptive sublime.

The freedom that resides at the center of Blakean aesthetics is a matter of the heart. The Enlightenment angel of Reason cannot drive the interpretive process; rather, it is by using the manifold senses embodied in Vision that one can reconstitute meaning, and, thus, experience the emancipation rather than imprisonment of form. Liberty for Blake is not grounded in codified laws or social customs; rather, it comes in the form of enthusiastic “Mercy Pity Peace” and, above all, “Love.” Love is “Lawless wingd & unconfind / And breaks all chains from every mind,” including those from the mind of Blake’s reader with Vision who finds liberation in the exemptive sublime. Just as Blake’s texts emphasize reading as a mode of process and becoming in which readers are offered an emancipated interpretive field, so too do they offer “a way of being with which an imposed logic of regulation would be incompatible, unnecessary, redundant: a form-of-life which does not recognize the existence of the law” (Makdisi, *Impossible History* 262). In “Being-for-the-Other,” Emmanuel Levinas explains that a first principle based

on the “possibility of disinterestedness” is only irrational under our current philosophical and socio-political paradigms. Levinas explains that

[i]n this possibility of disinterestedness, in this goodness, the awakening to biblical humanity is produced: to respond to the other, to the priority of the other, the asymmetry between me and the other, him always *before* me, man as an irrational animal, or rational according to a new reason. (120)

Blake wholeheartedly rejects the Enlightenment valorization of reason. Yet his insistence that Love will bring emancipation, that “The most sublime act is to set another before you” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 7:17, E36), is not irrational, even if it is “rational according to a new reason.” And from the Blakean new reason, from the regeneration of Blakean ontological aesthetics, we move beyond the *possibility* of justice.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION: EXTERIORITY AND
THE POSSIBILITY OF JUSTICE

The hostage is the one who is found responsible for what he has not done. . . . I am in principle responsible, prior to the justice that makes distributions, before the measurements of justice.

—Emmanuel Levinas, “The Proximity of the Other”

“Now is the time! — save and protect me! . . . Do not you desert me in the hour of trial!”

—the Monster, Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Overture(s) redux

This dissertation considers how some British literature of the 1790s proposes that open, nontyrannical, empathetic human exchange is not only at the center of sensibility and the sublime but also at the heart of subjectivity. While for some scholars there is an urge to separate literature from “real world” affairs, throughout this dissertation I have been arguing that aesthetics is an overture for talking about and understanding the possibility of “real world” justice. There is no dispute that governing bodies and courts can, and routinely do, enact justice. The British Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 (redistributing parliamentary representation and extending voting rights) and, in the United States, the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution (in 1919 granting women the right to vote), the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 (holding that segregation in public schools on the basis of race is unconstitutional), and the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 (outlawing many forms of racial and gender discrimination) are merely some of the numerous, groundbreaking laws that embody (to varying degrees) an egalitarian ethos. And yet around the world, the state of equality between people in a geographical region as vast as a country or as small as a town is in dire straits. Our reliance on juridical legality alone has failed, and, as this dissertation has been proposing, we must seek elsewhere to understand the possibility of justice.

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated how aesthetics can be a generative space for articulating the possibility of justice. Namely, I argued that the radical rewriting of the aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime by Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and William Blake was also a radical rethinking about social justice and the essential relational, communal element that underlies subjectivity. I also proved that for these writers, there is no definitive separation between sensibility, the sublime, and justice: without sensibility, one cannot experience the sublime, and the sublime for these writers is always tied to an understanding about justice as well as about the unseverable tie between self and other. In this chapter, a conclusion in the rhetorical sense, but, I hope, not an end to the overtures we make concerning justice, I consider what these rewritten aesthetic categories and reconfigured ideas about social justice and communal subjectivity look like in a cornerstone text of the British late Romantic era, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).¹ Written by the

¹ I have elected to use the 1818 (rather than the significantly revised 1831) version of *Frankenstein*. In addition to the fact that the 1818 version is closer in historical proximity to the literature of the 1790s I discuss in this dissertation, this version, as Anne

daughter of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, *Frankenstein* is a logical bookend to this dissertation both historically and biographically. Still more compelling is the way Shelley's novel extends rewritten sensibility² and the sublime³ past aesthetic categories and into the realm of ethical hospitality.

Ethical hospitality requires that we act to secure peace and protection not only for those whom we recognize as similar, that is, our friends and neighbors, but for those who are drastically different, that is, those to whom we might otherwise refer as our enemies. As I discussed in previous chapters, Williams's "An American Tale" and Godwin's *Caleb Williams* invoke elements of ethical hospitality; in *Frankenstein*, it is a driving concern of the text. *Frankenstein* is a text about what happens when one does not look outside of the law to determine what responsibilities one has towards the other and instead endeavors to negate alterity and destroy the other. The radical novelty of Frankenstein's experiment and the monstrous "child" whom Frankenstein births

K. Mellor explains, places a strong emphasis on Frankenstein's personal *responsibility* and *culpability* for the monster, whereas the 1831 version suggests that fate has a large role to play in the events that unfold in the novel. See Mellor, "Choosing a Text of *Frankenstein* to Teach."

² For a treatment of sensibility in *Frankenstein*, see Bour, who concludes that attempts at empathetic benevolence are dreadful failures in the novel. See also Hatch for a discussion of how the emotions of shame and disgust in the novel disrupt sympathetic connections.

³ See Gigante, who distinguishes between the ugly and the sublime and finds, under Burke's construction of the sublime, that *Frankenstein* does not portray sublime experiences of positive elevation.

emphasizes how *human*-made laws alone cannot sufficiently determine who acts justly and unjustly in the text. Indeed, even though it is the monster who commits multiple and brutal murders, as readers we find ourselves placing culpability for these illegal crimes not on the monster but, at least in part, on Frankenstein.

Some of this indeterminacy pertaining to culpability in the novel arises from the formal narrative structure of the text itself. Comprised of three volumes, Frankenstein's story occupies volumes one and three and the monster's tale makes up the second volume. However, although the volumes are told in first-person narration, Frankenstein and the monster are *not* the narrators. The story is told by Walton as told to him by Frankenstein, and takes the form of letters sent from Walton's arctic voyage to his sister in England. Indeed, by his own admission Walton does not make a real-time, direct transcription of Frankenstein's tale but rather "every night, when I am not engaged, [I] record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what he has related during the day. If I should be engaged, I will at least make notes" (19). Even the monster himself addresses the narrative injustice that has shaped Walton's opinion of him: "You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But, in the detail which he gave you of them, he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured, wasting in impotent passions" (184). The monster's perspective and even the "facts" of the story are filtered through Frankenstein and then through Walton. Thus, the reader may feel uncomfortable placing guilt squarely on the monster, as the monster has never had an opportunity to plead his case in his own voice.

The indeterminacy with which we figure guilt and innocence in the novel stems more significantly from the fact that Frankenstein has committed a crime, even if he has broken no legal codes. Frankenstein has neglected his responsibility to offer hospitality to the monster, and this neglect has caused not only an unjust act vis-à-vis an ethical trespass but also a crisis in Frankenstein's own identity formation. At the core of the ethical philosophy of hospitality are many of the elements that characterize the rewritten aesthetic categories of sensibility and the sublime: human exchange, empathetic love, a realization about social injustice, and an understanding about the communal nature of subjectivity. Thus, by reading *Frankenstein* alongside the theory of hospitality, we also continue the inquiry into how the novel further rewrites sensibility and the sublime.

Passing the aporia in *Frankenstein*

Both Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida⁴ have written extensively about hospitality as both justice and subjectivity. This justice, however, is not juridical justice in the sense of legally sanctioned and culturally codified designations about legal culpability or innocence. Levinas explains that welcoming the other means being responsible for the other even *without* culpability:

⁴ In "Monstrous Ingratitude: Hospitality in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," Peter Melville considers *Frankenstein* alongside Derrida's theory of hospitality. Quite surprisingly given the debt to Levinas that Derrida himself professes in relation to Derrida's theory of hospitality, Melville excludes Levinas from his inquiry and limits his discussion to Derridean hospitality in the novel.

If the other does something, it is I who am responsible. The hostage is the one who is found responsible for what he has not done. The one is responsible for the sin of the other. I am in principle responsible, prior to the justice that makes distributions, before the measurements of justice. . . . The other engages you in a situation where you are obligated without culpability, but your obligation is not less for all that. It is at the same time a charge. It is heavy and, if you will, goodness is just that. (“Proximity” 216)

Obligation without culpability, what Levinas calls “being-for-the-other,” is what turns the hospitable host into a hostage. Building upon Levinas’s theory of hospitality, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* Derrida emphasizes how the concept of host as hostage is encapsulated in the French word “*hôte*,” which means both host and guest (56). This word also carries with it the negative aspect of being hostage, as “host” “allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body” (Derrida, “Hospitality” 3). Thus, subjectivity operates within a paradigm in which the being-host and the being-hostage is the responsibility of the I (Derrida, *Adieu* 55).

In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Levinas posits that subjectivity is built upon the edict that an individual has a responsibility to welcome and not do violence to the other. For Derrida, hospitality requires one to bid enter with only a “*oui*,” a “yes.” This affirmative declaration is a coming to pass without *pas*, without “no.” The coming to pass of self and other, of “we”—of “*oui*”—without assimilation, is prior to constructions of humans and monsters, and creates a space for the *kadosh*, which Derrida explains is the holiness of the separated. Indeed, were Frankenstein to engage in what Derrida terms in “Violence and Metaphysics” an “ethico-metaphysical moment” (92) of welcoming the other, of bidding the monster to enter, paradoxically he would have

created “a metaphysics of infinite separation” (92-93). Significantly, the holiness of the separated comes in peace, not in war. The violence of alterity in *Frankenstein*, the war that Frankenstein wages on the monster, and that the monster wages in return after “misery has made [him] a fiend,” destroys the identity, and eventually the existence, of both human and monster, for, as Levinas explains, “[w]ar does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same” (*Totality* 21).

If, as Derrida states in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, hospitality is “the declaration of peace itself” (47), then the way in which Frankenstein faces the monster at their first meeting after Frankenstein’s initial rejection is the declaration of war itself. Indeed, rather than acting as host, Frankenstein reflects the Hegelian notion that self-consciousness and individuation is achieved by attempting to preserve the primacy of the self by doing violence to the other and positing the other as to-be-overcome (Russon 54-55). Frankenstein recounts:

I perceived, as the shape came nearer, (sight tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. I trembled with rage and horror, resolving to wait his approach, and then close with him in mortal combat. He approached; his countenance bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity, while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes. But I scarcely observed this; anger and hatred had at first deprived me of utterance, and I recovered only to overwhelm him with words expressive of furious detestation and contempt.

“Devil!” I exclaimed, “do you dare approach me? and do you not fear the fierce vengeance of my arm wreaked on your miserable head? Begone, vile insect! or rather stay, that I may trample you to dust!” (76)

At this meeting, Frankenstein reacts to the radical alterity of the monster with violence.

He “scarcely observed” the countenance of the monster due to his visceral feeling of

wanting to demolish its very existence, and due to his hope of totalizing all difference and obtaining complete mastery and absolute ownership over the other (Botting 131).

That one must depend on something outside of oneself to individuate and form self-consciousness is a cornerstone of Hegelian dialectics (Brivic 55), and, ultimately, vastly troubling to Hegel, just as it is to Frankenstein. As opposed to Levinasian being-for-the-other, in which individuation arises through sociability, in *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel articulates a theory of subjectivity that is being-for-itself, in which individuation arises through totalization.

The conceptual necessity of the experience through which the consciousness discovers that the Thing is demolished by the very determinateness that constitutes its essence and its being-for-self, can be summarized as follows. The Thing is posited as being *for itself*, or as the absolute negation of all otherness, therefore as purely *self*-related negation; but the negation that is self-related is the suspension of *itself*; in other words, the Thing has its essential being in another Thing. (76)

Hegel's "solution" to the fact that consciousness formation is not a self-executing process—that consciousness always relies on a relationship with the exterior other and develops within a relational framework—is to negate, appropriate, and consume the other into I. This solution involves Hegel's notion of the necessity to overcome otherness, the notion that "conscience knows it must force its will upon others" (Russon 104). For Hegel, consciousness is an act of violence. The consciousness calls for a process of "nullifying the object as distinct [from it], *appropriating* it as its own, and proclaiming itself as this certainty of being all reality, of being both itself and its object" (144).

With its emphasis on power, totalization, distance, separation, and isolation, the Hegelian process of individuation is reminiscent of the Burkean sublime. As I discuss in previous chapters, Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake reject Burke's notion of the sublime. In *Frankenstein*, however, Shelley maintains the conservative elements of the Burkean sublime. Almost all of the face-to-face interactions between Frankenstein and the monster take place in natural settings that are deeply reminiscent of the Burkean sublime. For example, Frankenstein and the monster meet on a "sea of ice," a glacier at the foot of Mont Blanc, which Frankenstein describes as an isolated space of extremely dangerous terrain that houses no signs of life:

The surface is very uneven, rising like the waves of a troubled sea, descending low, and interspersed by rifts that sink deep. The field of ice is almost a league in width, but I spent nearly two hours in crossing it. The opposite mountain is a bare perpendicular rock. From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene. (76)

Frankenstein's characterization of the "stupendous scene" focuses on grandeur and power, extreme isolation, physical danger, and passive human appropriation by energetic divine nature. However, although Shelley invokes some of the aesthetic touchstones of the Burkean sublime, there is no sublime moment of understanding between Frankenstein and the monster in this face-to-face meeting on the sea of ice. Rather, Frankenstein begins to have a sublime experience *before* the monster approaches ("My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy" (76)), but this fortifying experience is immediately ended upon his seeing the monster. In sharp contrast to

experiences of the sublime in Williams's texts, for example, wherein sublime moments are triggered by an intersubjective, empathetic response in the face of difference, in Shelley's text experiences of the sublime are shut down because of Frankenstein's refusal to engage in the subjective process of individuation through relational sociability and his inability to see past the alterity of the monster's face.

Relational sociability is the "alterity of the face, of the *for-the-other* which calls me to account" (Levinas, "Proximity" 215). For Levinas, the face is not the physical features that distinguish one individual from another; rather, the face is the existence of the other as "the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself" (*Totality* 39). The face is not an identifiable, nameable, biological structure, but rather the embodiment of our responsibility to the alterity of the other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explains that the responsibility that arises from the "ethico-metaphysical encounter" between I and other "is an optics. But it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type" (23). The subjugation of the biological face to the face as a peaceful welcoming of the radical other bears striking similarities to Blake's extreme rewriting of sensibility as Vision. Recall that Vision for Blake is not an empirical, singular sense that is conducted via the biological eye; rather, Vision is a practice rooted in the "Mercy Pity Peace and Love" of the "human form divine." Indeed, for Blake relying on vision—rather than Vision—is a violent practice that continues the cycle of repression of the human psyche and body by people such as orthodox religious leaders and government figures.

In another notable parallel between vision-the face and Vision-welcoming the alterity of the face, the monstrous, insensible violence of Blakean physical vision and the Levinasian physical face is dramatically played out in the deformed countenance of the monster in *Frankenstein*.

Because the monster's countenance is so repulsive to Frankenstein and propels Frankenstein to take up arms against him, the monster in one scene covers Frankenstein's eyes with his hands and exclaims: "I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion" (78). The monster's act of taking away Frankenstein's reliance on his eyes initially does begin to invoke a hospitable—or Visionary—response from Frankenstein. As the monster begins to relate his story to Frankenstein, the scientist expresses that "for the first time . . . I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness" (79). As the monster and Frankenstein sit in the monster's hut by the fire, the archetype of communal welcome, Frankenstein is able to listen to what the monster so desperately wants him to hear. Unfortunately, at the close of the monster's tale, the monster insists that Frankenstein "comply with my conditions" or the monster will destroy Frankenstein's remaining friends (77). Once again becoming embroiled in anger, Frankenstein meets this threat by returning to his former, violent stance that "there can be no community between you and me; we are enemies" (77).

The fleeting compassion that Frankenstein feels for the monster is not to be confused with hospitality. Frankenstein is obligated to serve as host—and hostage—to the monster due to the responsibility that arises from the command, the alterity, of the

other. However, Frankenstein not only refuses this call to action to engage in an “ethico-metaphysical moment,” but attempts to mute it entirely. Indeed, I argue that the moments of compassion are in fact just as violent as the moments in which Frankenstein openly declares war on the monster, for Frankenstein’s compassion in these moments arises from his recognition of the monster as the *same*, not as other:

I was moved. . . . I felt that there was some justice in his argument. His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations; and did I not, as his maker, owe him all the portions of happiness that it was in my power to bestow? (118)

Frankenstein is moved by the monster’s superior ability to reason, put forth eloquent arguments about the nature of justice, and understand the subtleties of language and feeling; namely, Frankenstein is moved by what makes the monster *human* to Frankenstein.⁵

The complex linguistic and psychological skills that the monster demonstrates are what makes Frankenstein proud of his creation, of his “son,” and makes him feel connected to the monster through what is the same between them, or even, what Frankenstein aspires to be. But an encounter between the same is merely kinship, whereas hospitality arises out of an encounter between strangers (Levinas, “Proximity”

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted that Frankenstein attempts “to tame the monster, to humanize him by bringing him within the circuit of the Law” when Frankenstein appeals for help from a magistrate (258). The Law, however, cannot regulate the monster’s behavior, because, as Spivak argues, “the absolutely Other cannot be selfed” and that “the monster has ‘properties’ which will not be contained by ‘proper’ measures” (258).

211). Frankenstein himself acknowledges that while he feels compassion and responsibility for the monster when the monster arouses within him what is same, he is repulsed when what is different comes to the fore. Frankenstein describes how the monster's "words had a strange effect upon me. I compassioned him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred" (119). Frankenstein's extreme change of heart upon recognizing the alterity of the monster demonstrates how one is not at peace with the other by welcoming the other as same, for, as Derrida explains, "[s]o long as what is other as other will not have been in some way 'welcomed' in epiphany, in the withdrawal or visitation of its face, it would make no sense to speak of peace. With the same, one is never at peace" (Adieu 85).

The peace, the welcoming, that comes from exteriority, from what is *other*, arises outside of, exterior to, the law. Previous chapters have shown how it is frequently the outlaws, those who are *exterior* to the law or who are othered by the law, who possess extreme sensibility and experience sublime realizations about injustice and communal subjectivity.⁶ For example, Williams's Mons. du Fossé, Wollstonecraft's Maria,

⁶ Perhaps with poetic justice given its argument about nonjuridical, aesthetic overtures for the possibility of justice, this dissertation is based upon writers who may also be regarded as outlaws. Rewriting sensibility and the sublime to argue for egalitarianism and recognition of the communal nature of the "individual" self, Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Blake did so at tremendous personal risk and in spite of expanding restrictions on freedoms of expression. With the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794 and the Treasonable Practices Act and Seditious Meetings Act of 1795, the British

Godwin's Raymond, and Blake's Urizen all transgress written laws and social customs to find, as Maria calls it, their "own sense of justice," a justice that is exterior to the law. Indeed, as I argue in chapter 3, Raymond is a paragon of justice in the hideously unjust world of juridical prosecution and persecution of *Caleb Williams* because he embodies nonjuridical justice in the form of hospitality. In contrast, the characters who enact grave injustice (most notably Williams's Baron du Fossé, Wollstonecraft's Venables, and Godwin's Tyrrel) work with the complicity of the law and act according to an insensibility that is nothing short of monstrous. In *Frankenstein*, the outlaw De Lacey offers an opportunity to further examine how hospitality is an extension and later iteration of radical sensibility and the sublime.

One of the most acute scenes of the injustice of failed hospitality in the novel takes place not between the monster and his creator, but between the monster and his fellow outlaw, De Lacey. After months of watching—and coming to deeply care for—the De Lacey family without their knowledge, the monster determines to present himself at the threshold of their home and seek hospitality from them. Fearing that his grotesque appearance may prove an insurmountable obstacle upon first glance, and dreading what he calls the "barbarity of man," the monster waits until all of the De Laceys are out except for the eldest of the family, who is blind.⁷ Just as when the monster covers

Frankenstein's eyes in an attempt to invoke a hospitable response arising from multiple

government forcefully sought to curtail any voices of dissent and arrested some friends of these writers, such as John Thelwall, John Horne Tooke, and Thomas Hardy.

⁷ For a study of *Frankenstein*'s critique of sighted culture and its privileging of words over visual evidence, see Joshua.

Vision—rather than a violent one arising from single vision—initial encounter intimates that the monster will finally receive the hospitality, the justice, that he desperately seeks.

The monster recalls:

I knocked. “Who is there?” said the old man—“Come in.”

I entered; “Pardon this intrusion,” said I, “I am a traveller in want of a little rest; you would greatly oblige me, if you would allow me to remain a few minutes before the fire.”

“Enter,” said De Lacey; “and I will try in what manner I can to receive your wants; but, unfortunately, my children are from home, and, as I am blind, I am afraid I shall find it difficult to procure food for you.”

“Do not trouble yourself, my kind host, I have food; it is warmth and rest only that I need.” (107)

As a “kind host,” De Lacey bids the monster to enter his home without awaiting an answer to his question “Who is there,” indicating that De Lacey does not fear intrusions by strangers, does not fear an interruption of his “being at home with oneself.” Indeed, later in their encounter, De Lacey refers to the monster as “stranger,” and attaches no negative connotations to the appellation.

Further, De Lacey is concerned not with his burden, with his being host(age), but merely concerned that he will not be able to provide food for the monster in a timely fashion. The discourse between De Lacey and the monster continues in a manner that suggests that the monster will be recognized both as other *and* as honored guest. Speaking with the monster, De Lacey reveals his belief about the nature of humanity in a way that resonates strongly with Adam Smith’s articulation of how an “impartial spectator” guides one’s benevolent, fellow-feeling toward others, an articulation that is at

the center of sensibility. De Lacy states that “the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity” (107). He then proves his adherence to this sentiment when he tells the monster that he will do whatever he can to help the monster, exclaiming: “I am poor, and an exile; but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature” (108).

De Lacey tells the monster “I feel for your misfortunes” (108), and, although he cannot offer food or luxuries to the monster, he bids the monster enter with only a *oui*. Unfortunately, this hospitality is short lived, and the encounter turns violent when the other De Lacey family members return. Although the De Laceys are exiles who were wrongfully accused of a crime and forced out of their country, they continue to define justice in restrictive, juridical terms. Even as the monster beseeches the eldest, blind De Lacey to shelter him against the cruelty of humanity, to answer his call as host, to “save and protect me,” crying out “Do not you desert me in the hour of trial” (108), the blind De Lacey is silent and the sighted De Laceys wage war on the monster, physically beating him and driving him from their home. The De Laceys, like the monster, are borderless hostages without a homeland, and yet even they cannot access enough sensibility to experience a sublime moment about the necessity of extending justice to the other. They cannot engage in what Blake refers to as “the most sublime act” of setting another, setting an other, setting the monster, before them because they see only the radical alterity of his physical countenance with their biological eyes. To see with Blakean Vision is to “identify another as distinct, but beloved in its distinction” (Frosch 127). The sighted De Laceys are as equally blind as their elderly father; because the

family has no sensibility/Vision, they can offer no hospitality, and thus no justice, in the face of difference.

It is critical to once again reflect upon the fact that hospitality is grounded on exteriority, but not on proximity (Levinas, *Totality* 38). The Stranger forces a being to posit himself or herself as a relational being, but the relation is not one of geographic distance; it is not a relation reducible to the “I am here” and “the other is there.” Justice as hospitality and subjectivity requires one to acknowledge that I “house” an other in I. That the other disturbs this “being at home with oneself,” and that the non-biological countenance of the other is a call for responsibility on the part of the host, on the part of the I, is what the characters in *Frankenstein* cannot face. The alterity of the countenance of the monster is inescapable, and the characters in *Frankenstein* attempt to deface and assimilate the exteriority of the other through totalization. Because no one in *Frankenstein* is able to see with Vision past the monster’s face to welcome the other through relational sociability, there is no justice, no coming to pass, for anyone. Indeed, while some characters, such as Walton, may act at times with benevolent kindness, hospitality, and thus justice, arises only in the face of difference.

As an explorer searching for an arctic passage, Walton exists in a space of possibility. Frequently perilously trapped in a broken sea of ice, Walton’s boat is neither freely at sea nor firmly on land. His crew lives on the brink of death due to the extreme, natural hazards inherent in their arctic location, and he is consumed with nursing Frankenstein back from death as the scientist slips in and out of consciousness. As captain, Walton’s identity is grounded in authority, custom, and codes of conduct, yet as

head of a ship breaking uncharted territory he also embodies lawlessness. Upon saving Frankenstein from the sea of ice, Walton gladly shelters his dying guest. Walton offers Frankenstein nourishing food and even his captain's cabin. Although Walton frequently refers to Frankenstein as his "guest" and "the stranger," there is nothing *strange* about Frankenstein in the eyes of Walton. Indeed, the two characters are so similar that at times Walton seems to be Frankenstein's doppelgänger. Thus, the help Walton offers to Frankenstein may be kind, but ethical hospitality arises only in the face of that which is radically different.

Speaking of the aporia that exists between host and guest—between self and other—in hospitality, Derrida characterizes the space of passing, entering, and crossing that must come to pass between self and other using Levinas's notion of exteriority but not proximity:

The "I enter," crossing the threshold, this "I pass" . . . puts us on the path, if I may say, of the *aporos* or of the *aporia*: the difficulty of the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent, which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting. It would be the "coming to pass" of an event that would no longer have the form or the appearance of a *pas*: in sum, a coming without *pas*. (8)

This space, this coming to pass, is much like the sublime and the Blakean exemptive sublime I describe in the previous chapters: it is a space of justice, liberation, and realization about the communal nature of self and other, and a space is reached through human(e) sensibility. It is a space of possibility, not demarcated geography. This space is also reminiscent of the alternative space, the "progression," that arises from the

dynamism of Blakean contraries. As Blake states in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without Contraries is no progression.” Blakean contraries enact mutability and progress, not cancellation and totalization.

If we approach the aporia between self and other, between enacting justice and injustice, as an approach into juridical exteriority, into, for example, aesthetics and hospitality, we find that the aporia is, after all, not impassable. Justice is individuation based on the radical—though peaceful—alterity of the encounter, the call that commands one to respond, to become, to come to pass as hostage and as host, as *hôte*. Recognizing and answering the call of responsibility for the other creates an eternal separation, an absolute distance, but not an impassable aporia. Note again that the *kadosh*, the holiness of the separated, comes in peace, not in war. The distance that comes in war will never hold, and it is time that we come to pass.

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